

4

FOLLOW THE FOOD

He rained down manna also upon them
for to eat: and gave them food from
heaven.

— PSALM 78, VERSE 25

FOOD AS A TRACER FOR POWER STRUCTURES

Just before sunrise on a May morning, more than six hundred richly dressed Inca youths lined up in two parallel rows in a sacred field, surrounded by swaying stalks of maize. As the first glimmers of the sun appeared, they began to sing, quietly at first but with gathering intensity as the sun rose into the sky. Their song was a military victory chant, or *haylli*. The singing built in volume throughout the morning, reaching a climax at noon. It then grew gradually quieter during the afternoon and ended when the sun set. In the twilight the young men, who were all newly initiated sons of Inca nobles,

began to harvest the crop. This scene, repeated every year, was just one of several maize-related Inca customs that demonstrated and reinforced the privileged status of the ruling elite.

Another example was the maize-planting ceremony that took place in August. When the sun set between two great pillars on the hill of Picchu, as seen from the center of Cuzco, the Inca capital, it was time for the king to initiate the growing season. He did so by plowing and planting one of several sacred fields that could only be tilled and worked by members of the nobility. According to one eyewitness account: "At sowing time, the king himself went and ploughed a little . . . the day when the Inca went to do this was a solemn festival of all the lords of Cuzco. They made great sacrifices to this flat place, especially of silver, gold and children." The plowing was then carried on by Inca nobles, but only after the king had started the process. "If the Inca had not done this, no Indian would dare to break the earth, nor did they believe it would produce if the Inca did not break it first," noted another observer. Further sacrifices of llamas and guinea pigs were made as the maize planting began. In the middle of the field priestesses poured *chicha*, or maize

beer, onto the soil around a white llama. These offerings were to protect the fields from frost, wind, and drought.

For the Incas, agriculture was closely linked to warfare: The earth was defeated, as if in battle, by the plow. So the harvest ceremony was carried out by young noblemen as part of their initiation as warriors, and they sang a haylli as they harvested the maize to celebrate their victory over the earth. At the beginning of the next growing season, only the ruling Inca had the power to defeat the earth and capture its reproductive energies to ensure the success of the agricultural cycle, so he had to break the ground first. This emphasized his power over his people: Without him, they would starve. The symbolic defeat of the earth was also a reenactment of the battle between the first Incas and the indigenous inhabitants of Cuzco, the Hualla, whom the Incas had defeated before planting the first corn. As the Incas saw it, they had triumphed over nature in two ways: by defeating the local savages and then by introducing agriculture. The ruling elite claimed to be the direct descendants of the winners of that original battle. The ceremonies highlighted this link, and hence the right of the elite to rule over the masses, while also suggesting that the

hierarchical structure of society was part of an ancient natural order. The implication was that if the king and his nobles were overthrown, there would be nobody to make the crops grow.

Food-related activities of this kind were widely used to define and reinforce the privileged position of the elite in early civilizations. Food, or food-production capacity, was used to pay tax. Food was extracted as tribute after military victories. Food offerings and sacrifices were used to maintain the stability of the universe and ensure the continuation of the agricultural cycle. Formal handouts of food, as rations and wages and at feasts and festivals, also emphasized how food, and hence power, was distributed. In the modern world, you follow the money to determine where power lies. In the ancient world it is food that reveals power structures. To illuminate the organization of the first civilizations, you must follow the food.

FOOD AS CURRENCY

Food was used within early civilizations as a form of currency, in barter transactions, and to pay wages and taxes. Food was passed upward from the farmers to the ruling elite in various ways and then redistributed as

wages and rations to support the elite's activities: building, administration, warfare, and so on. The principle that some or all of the agricultural surplus had to be handed over is common to all early civilizations, since the appropriation of the surplus had been central to their emergence in the first place. There were many different schemes. But in each case the structure of society — who people worked for, where their sustenance came from, and where their loyalties lay — was defined by food.

In Egypt and Mesopotamia, tax was paid both directly in the form of food and indirectly in the form of agricultural labor. Most Egyptian farmers did not own their own land but rented it from landowners, who claimed a fraction of the resulting harvest. The state owned a lot of land, so this produced a lot of food income. Other land belonged to officials, temples, nobles, and the pharaoh himself, and this too was rented to farmers in return for a share of their harvest, with a fraction of that rent going as tax to the state. The rent charged and tax levied depended on the agricultural potential of the land, given its proximity to wells and canals and the level of each year's Nile flood.

The Hekanakhte Papers, a set of letters

dating from around 1950 B.C. written by a priest to his family while he was away from his estate, give details of this system in action, while also providing a rare glimpse of everyday life in Ancient Egypt. Hekanakhte seems to have been in charge of land belonging to a temple, and in his letters he advises his family about which bits of land to cultivate and how much each can be expected to yield, how many sacks of barley to charge when renting land to other farmers, and how many sacks of barley to pay the laborers on the estate. Evidently times are bad and food is scarce, and Hekanakhte reminds his family that they are eating better than most people. There is a quarrel over a handmaiden named Senen, and much indulgence is shown to a spoiled young man named Snofru. Debts and rents are collected in barley and wheat, and in some cases jars of oil are accepted as payment instead: one jar of oil is worth two sacks of barley, or three of wheat.

Tax, like rent, was also paid in the form of food, and tax collectors took the resulting goods to regional administrative centers, where they were redistributed as pay to government officials, craft workers, and farmers seconded to work for the state as *corvée* laborers. Such workers built and

maintained irrigation systems, constructed tombs and pyramids, worked in mines, and performed military service. During a stint of *corvée* work, which might last for several months, laborers were fed, housed, and clothed by the state. It was *corvée* workers who built the pyramids; surviving ration lists show that they received daily portions of bread and beer, supplemented with onions and fish. A similar scheme prevailed in Mesopotamia, where land was owned by wealthy families, temples, city councils, or the palace. Farmers handed over a fraction of their harvest to rent land, and the king levied taxes on non-palace fields. In this way most of the surplus went to the king, the temples belonging to various gods, and landowners. As in Egypt, *corvée* labor was used in large construction projects.

In some cultures, however, taxes were paid solely in the form of labor. In Shang China, rural clans worked their own communally held fields, but they also cultivated special fields, the produce from which went to the king, to rural governors, or to other officials. Similarly, Inca farming families cultivated their own fields and those belonging to their clan, or *ayllu*. Produce from the *ayllu*'s fields supported the local chief and the cult of the local god. Farmers also spent part of their

time working on state-owned fields and on those belonging to temples of more important gods. This scheme arose from a deal struck when *ayllu*, which were previously autonomous communities, were incorporated into the Inca kingdom: The clans were allowed to keep their own land and its produce, provided they supplied labor to work state-owned fields in return. This meant that the Inca king was not given any food as tax by his subjects, which would have placed him in their debt; instead, they worked his land and he took the produce, which was transported to regional storehouses. Inca farmers also had to carry out *corvée* work from time to time, doing construction work, mining, or military service. All this was recorded using a system of colored, knotted strings called *quipus*.

Aztec society was divided into landholding groups called *calpullis*. Unlike Inca *ayllu*, all the members of which were equals under the chief, *calpullis* were overseen by a few high-ranking families who belonged to the Aztec nobility. Each family cultivated both its own fields and shared fields, the produce from which supported the *calpulli*'s nobles, temples, teachers, and soldiers. *Calpullis* also had to provide a certain amount of tax and *corvée* labor to the Aztec

state. In addition, the king, state institutions, and important nobles and warriors owned their own land, which was worked by landless farmers who were given just enough food to subsist on. The rest of the produce from this land went directly to its owners.

Food also flowed from subject states in the form of tribute, extracted by dominant states and city-states from the weaker neighbors under threat of military force, usually after a military defeat. Following the defeat of one city-state by another in Mesopotamia, for example, the losing city would be looted and would also have to pay regular tribute to the winning city. Sargon of Akkad, who conquered the city-states of Mesopotamia around 2300 B.C. and unified them into an empire, demanded vast amounts of tribute from each city: Inscriptions speak of entire warehouses of grain being paid. As well as emphasizing his superiority, this kept the subject cities weak and Sargon's capital strong. It also allowed him to support a huge staff: He boasted of feeding 5,400 men every day. By redistributing tribute among their followers, rulers could reinforce their leadership and maintain support for further military campaigns.

Perhaps the best example of tribute col-

lection is that of the Aztec "triple alliance" between Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. These three city-states collected tribute from the whole of central Mexico. Nearby subject states in and around the Valley of Mexico had to supply huge quantities of food: Every day the chief of Texcoco received enough maize, beans, squashes, chiles, tomatoes, and salt to feed more than two thousand people. More distant states supplied cotton, cloth, precious metals, exotic birds, and manufactured items. The level of tribute paid depended on each state's distance from the three capitals (the alliance's control over those farther away was weaker, so it demanded less in tribute from them) and on whether the state put up a fight or not before submitting to alliance rule (states that gave in without a fight paid less). The constant flow of food and other goods toward the capital meant there was no doubt where the power lay. Aztec rulers used this tribute to pay officials, provision the army, and support public works. Tribute handed out to the nobility reinforced the ruler's position and simultaneously weakened the rulers of subordinate states, who ended up with less to distribute among their own followers: less food meant less power.

FEEDING THE GODS

As systems of social organization became more elaborate, so too did the religious practices that provided cosmological justification for the elite's right to levy all these taxes. Religious beliefs and traditions varied widely among the world's first civilizations, but in many cases there was a clear congruence between the payment of taxes by the masses to the elite and the "payment" of sacrifices and offerings by the elite to the gods. Such offerings were believed to return energy to its divine source, so that the source could continue to animate nature and supply humans with food. Rather than being so powerful that they could exist without humanity's support, the gods were thought to be dependent on humans, and humans were thought to be dependent in turn on the gods. An Egyptian text from around 2070 B.C. refers to humans as the creator god's "cattle," for example, implying that the god both looked after humans and depended upon them for his own sustenance. Similarly, many cultures believed that the gods had created mankind to provide spiritual nourishment in the form of sacrifices and prayers. In return, the gods provided physical nourishment for humans by making plants and animals grow. Sacri-

fices were regarded as an essential means of maintaining this cycle.

Some Mesoamerican cultures believed that the gods even sacrificed themselves or each other from time to time to ensure the continued existence of the universe and survival of mankind. The Maya, for example, believed that maize was the flesh of the gods containing divine power, and at harvest time the gods were, in effect, sacrificing themselves to sustain humanity. This divine power passed into humans as they ate, and was particularly concentrated in their blood. Human sacrifices in which blood was spilled were a way to repay this debt and return the divine power to the gods. Food and incense were provided as offerings as well, but human sacrifices were thought to be most important of all.

The Aztecs also regarded human sacrifices as a way to repay energy owed to the gods. The Earth Mother was nourished by human blood, they believed, and the crops would only grow if she was given enough of it. It was supposedly an honor to be sacrificed, but even so victims seem not to have belonged to the ruling elite. Instead, they were mostly criminals, prisoners of war, and children. Human flesh and blood were thought to be made from maize, so these

sacrifices sustained the cosmic cycle: Maize became blood, and blood was then transformed back into maize. Sacrificial victims were referred to as "tortillas for the gods." The Incas also thought sacrifice was necessary to nourish the gods. They offered llamas, guinea pigs, birds, cooked vegetables, fermented drinks, cocoa, gold, silver, and elaborately woven cloth, which was burned to release the energy that had gone into weaving it. Food and alcoholic drinks made from maize were thought to be particularly favored by the gods. But most valued of all were human sacrifices. After subjugating a new region, the Incas sacrificed its most beautiful people.

In Egyptian temples, animals were killed and their flesh was presented to images of the gods. The gods were believed to inhabit the images three times a day in order to consume the life force from the offerings, which they needed to replenish the energy they expended to keep the universe going. Food offerings were also required to maintain the life force of dead humans, who had become gods. So offerings were frequently made to dead pharaohs, and tombs were filled with jars of food to sustain the dead in the afterlife. Similarly, in Shang China both gods and royal ancestors were offered

grain, millet beer, animals (dogs, pigs, wild boars, sheep, and cattle), and human sacrifices, most of them prisoners of war. The gods were thought to drink the blood of the slaughtered victims. But the most elaborate offerings were made to the ancestors of Shang kings, who depended on these sacrifices as food. If their ancestors were not sufficiently well fed, the Shang kings believed, they would punish their descendants with poor harvests, military defeats, and plagues.

The Mesopotamians thought humans had a duty to provide food and earthly residences for the gods, who were provided with two meals a day in their temples. The gods depended on this nourishment from humans: In the Mesopotamian version of the flood story, the gods destroy humanity and then regret their action when they grow hungry because of the lack of offerings. But one of their number, Enki, warns Utnapishtim (the Mesopotamian equivalent of the biblical Noah) of the coming flood and tells him to build an ark. When Utnapishtim emerges from his boat and offers a burnt sacrifice, the gods crowd around the smoke "like flies" because it is the first nourishment they have had in days. They then forgive Enki for allowing a few humans to survive. The Mesopotamians believed the

gods could survive without humans, but only if they produced their own food — which is why they created humans to do it for them, and taught humans about agriculture.

In all these cases, sacrifices and offerings channel energy back to the supernatural realm as spiritual food to nourish gods and ancestors and ensure that they, in turn, continue to nourish mankind by keeping the agricultural cycle going. The presentation of sacrifices gave the elite a crucial intermediary role between the gods and the farming masses. By paying tax, the farmers in effect exchanged food for earthly order and stability, as the elite managed irrigation systems, organized military defenses, and so on. And by providing sacrifices to the gods, the elite in effect exchanged spiritual food for cosmic order, as the gods maintained the stability of the universe and the fertility of the soil.

That such similar religious ideologies arose in the earliest civilizations, separated as they were in time and space, is surely no coincidence. The notion that the gods depended on offerings from mankind for their survival was peculiar to these cultures, no doubt because it was very convenient for the members of their ruling elites. It legiti-

mized the unequal distribution of wealth and power and provided an implicit warning that without the managerial activities of the elite, the world would come to an end. The farmers, their rulers, and the gods all depended on each other to ensure their survival; catastrophe would ensue if any of them deviated from their assigned roles. But just as the farmers had a moral imperative to provide food to the elite, the elite in turn had a duty to look after the people and keep them safe and healthy. There was, in short, a social compact between the farmers and their rulers (and, by extension, the gods): If we provide for you, you must provide for us. The result was that taxes paid in earthly food and sacrifices of spiritual food, all justified by religious ideology, reinforced the social and cultural order.

THE AGRICULTURAL ORIGINS OF INEQUALITY

In the modern world, the direct equation of food with wealth and power no longer holds. For people in agricultural societies, food functions as a store of value, a currency, and an indicator of wealth; it is what people toil all day to produce. But in modern urban societies, money performs these roles instead. Money is a more flex-

ible form of wealth, easily stored and transferred, and it can be readily converted into food at a supermarket, corner shop, café, or restaurant. Food is only equivalent to wealth and power when it is scarce or expensive, as it was for most of recorded history. But by historical standards, food today is relatively abundant and cheap, at least in the developed world.

Yet food has not entirely lost its association with wealth. It would be strange if it had, given how far back the connection goes. Even in modern societies there are numerous echoes of food's once-central economic role, in both words and customs. In English a household's main earner is called the breadwinner, and money may be referred to as bread or dough. Shared meals are still a central form of social currency: The elaborate dinner party must be reciprocated with an equally lavish meal in return. Extravagant feasts are a popular way to demonstrate wealth and status and, in the business world, to remind people who is boss. And in many countries the poverty line is defined in relation to the income required to purchase a basic minimum of foodstuffs. Poverty is a lack of access to food; so wealth, by implication, means not having to worry about where your next meal

is coming from.

A common feature of wealthy societies, however, is a feeling that an ancient connection with the land has been lost, and a desire to reestablish it. For the wealthiest Roman nobles, knowledge of agriculture and ownership of a large farm was a way to demonstrate that they had not forgotten their people's purported origins as humble farmers. Similarly, many centuries later in pre-revolutionary France, Queen Marie-Antoinette had an idealized farm built on the grounds of the palace of Versailles, where she and her ladies-in-waiting would dress up as shepherdesses and milkmaids, and milk cows that had been painstakingly cleaned. Today, people in many wealthy parts of the world enjoy growing their own food in gardens or on allotments. In many cases they could easily afford to buy the resulting fruit and vegetables instead, but growing their own food provides a connection with the land, a gentle form of exercise, a supply of fresh produce, and an escape from the modern world. (Growing food without the use of chemicals is often particularly highly regarded in such circles.) In California, the richest part of the richest country in the world, it is the simple food of the Italian peasantry that is most highly

venerated. A tourist village has even opened in India, near the technology hot spot of Bangalore, where the newly prosperous middle classes can go to experience a romanticized version of their forebears' existence as subsistence farmers. One of the privileges of wealth is the option to emulate the lifestyles of the rural poor.

Wealth tends to distance people from working on the land; indeed, not having to be a farmer is another way to define wealth. Today, the richest societies are those in which the proportion of income spent on food, and the fraction of the workforce involved in food production, are lowest. Farmers account for only around 1 percent of the population in rich countries such as the United States and Britain. In poor countries such as Rwanda, the proportion of the population involved in agriculture is still more than 80 percent — as it was in Uruk 5,500 years ago. In the developed world, most people have specialized jobs that do not relate to agriculture, and they would find it difficult to survive if they suddenly had to produce all their own food. The process of separation into different roles that began when people first took up farming, and abandoned the egalitarian hunter-gatherer lifestyle, has reached its

logical conclusion.

That people in the developed world today generally have a specific job — lawyer or mechanic or doctor or bus driver — is a direct consequence of food surpluses resulting from a continuous increase in the productivity of farming over the past few thousand years. Another corollary of these burgeoning food surpluses was the division into rich and poor, powerful and weak. None of these distinctions can be found within a hunter-gatherer band, the social structure that defined mankind for most of its existence. Hunter-gatherers own few or no possessions, but that does not mean they are poor. Their "poverty" only becomes apparent when they are compared with members of settled, agricultural societies who are in a position to accumulate goods. Wealth and poverty, in other words, seem to be inevitable consequences of agriculture and its offspring, civilization.