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REPUBBLICA ITALIANA



REGIONE AUTÒNOMA DE SARDIGNA
REGIONE AUTONOMA DELLA SARDEGNA

Castle of Monreale

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Eating habits

The discovery of objects concerning food preparation within the Castle of Monreale has allowed formulating various hypotheses regarding the activities which took place inside the theta space, where a stove was brought to light and which identifies the environment as a kitchen.

Eating habits are one of the most interesting aspects of the culture and civilisation of a population and of a historical period. During the Middle Ages, Sardinia shifts from a typical Mediterranean diet such as that of the Roman period, based on the wheat-wine-oil triad, supplemented with cheese and meat, to an economy based on hunting, fishing, gathering of wild fruits and sheep and pig farming.

The hearth constituted the fundamental element for preparing food: here raw materials were cooked by boiling, roasting or under the ashes. Earthenware or copper pots, hanging and suspended over the flame, were used to cook meat, fish, soups or porridges. There were also rudimentary ovens for baking bread. Meat and fish were also preserved in salt. The lower classes' diet consisted in cereal and legume soups with a large slice of bread topped with sauces low in fats, proteins and vitamins. Those belonging to the wealthier classes used to eat big game consisting of wild boars, fallow deer, venison, mouflons, hares, but also the meat of small game animals such as birds, pigeons, doves, partridges, quails and thrushes.





Fig. 1 - Example of a medieval kitchen (from *Tacuina sanitatis*, 14th century).

They practised viticulture and wine was also produced from dried grapes; "saba" was obtained from the musts, this was a sweetener already used in ancient Roman times in order to make cakes that are still part of our culinary heritage such as (*sas tilicas*).



Fig. 2 - Medieval miniature depicting grape crushing in the vineyard
(From B. MARCHISIO, *La vite, la vigna, il vino nella Bibbia*, Cavallermaggiore-Gribaudo 1999).

The use of spices was important in order to mask the "strong" flavours of the game but also frequently employed in wines to mask, with the addition of honey, the excessive acidity level.

With the domination by the Doria family from Genoa, especially in Sassari, the cultivation of chickpeas, used roasted, ground and for preparing the "farinata" (unleavened chickpea flatbread), also spread.

The way meals were eaten also changed during the Middle Ages: whilst Romans and Etruscans ate lying down (fig. 3) in the Middle Ages food was eaten when sitting on stools or benches (fig. 4). The dish with the food was placed at the centre of the table and guests took food from it directly with their hands, as were some water and wine containers, whose use is also testified in the castle of Monreale by a jug in archaic majolica (fig. 5)



Fig. 3 - A scene from a banquet in Roman times: a servant takes the food to the lady of the house and her son, who are lying on the *triclinium* together with their dog (from <http://dizionariupi.zanichelli.it/storiadigitale/p/voce/5261/roma-antica#!prettyPhoto>).



Fig. 4 - Wedding banquet – a miniature from "*Biblia Porta*", 13th century – Lausanne, Bibliothèque Cantonale (from <http://ilpalazzodisichelgaita.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/banchetto-nuziale.jpg>).



Fig. 5 - Pitcher in archaic majolica from the castle of Monreale, dated to the 14th century
(photo by Unicity S.p.A.)



■ Credits

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