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Author(s): Consuelo Manetta

Source: *Material Culture*, Spring 2016, Vol. 48, No. 1, Special Issue: Consumer Goods (Spring 2016), pp. 28-43

Published by: International Society for Landscape, Place & Material Culture

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44507771>

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# "Our Daily Bread" in Italy: Its Meaning in the Roman Period and Today

*Consuelo Manetta, Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University*

**Abstract** From antiquity to the New Millennium, bread continues to be a staple in the daily and ceremonial life of Mediterranean culture, even though its uses, shapes, and ingredients have been modified over time. Italy, in particular, figures among the countries where this food has represented an important geographical and cultural marker from the most ancient periods. Bread-making requires diverse types of knowledge and skills, from commanding nature in order to transform the landscape for the purpose of a cereal-crop, to the building of works (factories and bakeries), which are essential for bread-making. This paper focuses on the meaning of the bread, both as a food staple and as a cultural symbol, in two key periods. The first refers to the Roman period, and the second to modern time (post-eighteenth century), when baking production acquired an industrial scale. The study enlists three levels of analysis to understand how consumers viewed the product: the materials and techniques of bread making, its production, and its sales and distribution.

**Keywords:** Bread in Antiquity, Ancient Bakeries, Italy.

## Introduction

Since the very first conquests of humans over nature in the Neolithic era, bread has been a staple in the Mediterranean. Its transformation as an everyday object has evolved to the current period in which bread represents significant transgenic production and different human skill levels inherent during its manufacture. Indeed, bread-making requires a vast knowledge of soil fertility, farming methods (starting from the crop to the transforming of seeds), the various uses of cereals, and the different methods of baking. Often, cereal farming means transforming the natural landscape. These transformations include the making of fields, paths, clearings, wells, canals for cultivation of raw materials, silos, and machineries. The latter reflects a wide array of technologies that span from ancient millstones to modern mechanical dough mixers and sophisticated ovens.

This paper investigates bread and its different values throughout the centuries, both as a food staple and cultural symbol. More specifically, the diachronic

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**Consuelo Manetta** is currently a Marie Curie research fellow at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS), Denmark. Her main research interests encompass different aspects of classical archaeology including architectural history and decoration, ancient topography, tombs, sarcophagi, and mosaics. During the last six years she has been studying different aspects of ancient Thracian material culture of present-day Bulgaria, including an in-depth study of the iconography of funerary wall paintings and their interconnection with ritual and cultural issues. She can be reached at: [consuelomanetta@aias.au.dk](mailto:consuelomanetta@aias.au.dk).

analysis is focused on two key periods: The Roman period, and the modern era, starting from the 18th century when baking production acquired an industrial scale. The focus is on consumers' associations, feelings, and reliance on bread during these times. While it is easy to explore the tastes, preferences, and habits of people in modern times, it is considerably more difficult to understand how ancient consumers viewed bread. In dealing with antiquity, we must rely on sparser material evidences, i.e., archaeological discoveries related to bread manufacture, and its symbolic value in ritual and funerary contexts, as well as on primary sources. Nonetheless, it is evident that the inputs, shapes, and characteristics of ancient bread, as well as technological achievements progressively applied to bread production or the social value of bakers' profession, reflect consumers' attitudes toward this product. I enlist the following three levels of analysis as markers to achieve these objectives: the materials and techniques of bread making, its production, and its sales and distribution.

### **Italy as “Bread Cornucopia”**

Among European countries, Italy is one of the richest in terms of the variety of bread production. The only two high-quality breads recognized by the European Commission are Italian (Commission Regulation (Ec) no 1291/2003, 18 July 2003). Both of them are made with very traditional processing techniques. Altamura bread (*Pane di Altamura*, Puglia) is treated with sourdough and incorporates bran flour made from durum wheat that is farmed near Altamura. The Genzano bread (*Pane di Genzano*, Roma) is also treated with sourdough, but it is baked with chestnut bundles. So indelible is bread-making in Italy that the etymology of several Italian toponyms highlights the relation among some regions and bread production; bread is an important geographical marker, which dates back to antiquity (Figure 1). Variants of Latin toponyms *Pistorium*, *Pistoria* or *Pistoriae* attest to this as indicated by the Italian city Pistoia, Tuscany (Pl. N.H. 3.52; Granucci 2004:718). These place names are all linked to the Latin word *pistores*, which means bakers. The ancient playwright Plautus jokes with the double entendre of the name of Pistoia's citizens in his play, *Captivi*. The name of the Sicilian city of Ragusa comes from the Byzantine word *Rogos*, which means granary/silo related to the agricultural richness of the area. During the Arabic domination, the toponym was changed to *Ragus* or *Rakkusa*, meaning “(A) place known for an unexpected event” (Coria 1997, 21), probably related to a battle that took place there. Thereafter, during the Norman and Aragon periods, this expression assumed the Latin form *Ragusia*. Finally, at the end of the eighteenth century, the city received the modern name Ragusa (Coria 1997,21). The small city of Sanluri, Sardinia, likely derived from the ancient name *Sellori*, originated from *Se-Lori*, *Sullurium* and *Selluri*. The name seems to refer to the local cereal richness (*Lori* = grain). According to this reading, Sanluri could mean *Su logu de su Lori* (the place of the grain) (Brigaglia and Tola 2006).



**Figure 1.** Italian toponyms connected with bread-making. Graphic elaboration by author.

### **Bread-making in Roman Times**

Among ancient Roman food, bread is one of the most documented food in primary sources. It appears in ancient paintings and reliefs in which different steps of bread-making and its sales are described (Blümner 1912, 40-46; Ciancio Rossetto 1973, 45-52; Zimmer 1982, 106-120; Wilson and Schörle 2009, 101-123). Bread was a staple food in Roman diet, especially for plebeian classes. Generally, it was unleavened bread. The well-known metonymic “*Panem et circenses*,” which the Roman satirical poet Juvenal (Juv. 10.81) coined, summarizes the aspirations of the Roman plebeians (i.e., receiving free bread and circus games from the State). Though Juvenal uses the phrase for decrying the selfishness of common people and their neglect of wider concerns, the phrase actually refers to the Roman

practice of providing free wheat to Roman citizens as well as other entertainments like circus games, a strategy frequently manipulated by Roman magistrates for obtaining votes from the lower classes (Weeber 1994). The practice of offering grain dole (*Annona; frumentationes*) started during the Republican period according to the *lex frumentaria*, (literally grain law) (Smith 1875, 548-551). Afterwards, this practice was taken under the control of the autocratic Roman emperors (Virlouvet 1994, 11-29). During the imperial period, Rome imported about 3.5 million tons of wheat from different Roman provinces (e.g., Sicily, Sardinia, the Asian and African provinces, and especially from Egypt) (Rickman 1980). A painting found in the *tablinum* (a room) of a house (VII, 3.30) in Pompeii (79 AD) is generally interpreted as a scene of bread dole: here the bread-maker or magistrate distributes bread to the people as an act of public munificence (Clarke 2003, 259-261: Plates 23).

### Material and Techniques

Pliny (N.H.18.83-84 "*Pultem autem, non panem. Vixisse longo tempore Romanos manifestum*") informs that originally (seventh-sixth century BC) Romans were used to eating a pottage made of different cereals that were sometimes mixed with meat. From this pottage, perhaps dried and roasted, came the first Roman focaccia bread. It was named *far* (emmer), from the first cereal used for this kind of bread (Plin. N.H. 18.62; White 1996, 39). According to Pliny, this term has then indicated grain in general (Plin. N. H.18.88 "*Farinam a farre dictam nomine ipso apparet*"). Flat breads made of the same cereal and named in the same way also had a religious function. They were used (*farreatio, confarreatio*-spelt bread) during sacred ceremonies, as well as weddings and sacrifices (Plin. N.H. 18.10). Yet they were also used for very practical purposes, such as mash for fattening the poultry or for filling food with meat (Dosi and Schnell 1986, 52; for other kind of doughs with emmer, see Plin. N.H. 18.84, and 72). The emmer and the hard outer coat of this grain that had to be roasted and ground in a mortar are etymologically connected to the name of servants, *pistores* (*pinsere far*), in charge of grinding and milling the grains. The word has also been used for naming the profession of the baker and pastry chef (Dosi and Schnell 1986, 52).

The provision of high-quality grains from Sicily and Africa (starting from the fifth century BC) and the development of threshing and sifting techniques made it easier to clean the grain and improve the production and taste of breads. These enhancements are obviously also connected to technological developments applied to milling, such as the introduction of millstones, followed by mills powered by men, mules and horses. The use of equines for this purpose has been confirmed by the discovery of animal skeletons in the so called *Julius Polibius Pistrinum* in Pompeii (9. 12, 6-8), that were certainly working when they were buried after the Vesuvian eruption in 79 AD.

Particularly well-established at the beginning of bread production, Roman bread improved thanks to the leavening (Bosello 1993, 52; 177), which was introduced in Rome relatively late (second century BC) after the conquest of Greece, where different kinds of bread had been well-known for a long time

(Amouretti 1986, 110-131; Pisani 2003, 3-24; Palmeri 2007, 3). But conservative Romans, protectors of the austere traditions of the first Roman generations as *Cato*, considered the introduction of new and softer flours as a sign of decadence. In his *De Agricultura* (74-87), the ancient author gives recipes for bread, cakes, and porridge according to the Roman tradition. Pliny (N.H. 18.68) mentions yeasts with a wine base and brewer's yeast (White 1996, 41).

During the imperial period, when bread-making technologies reached a high grade of production, it was possible to find many different kinds of breads in the Roman world. (Dosi and Schnell 1986, 54). There was, for instance, the kind known as bread of *Picenum*, made very hard after the addition of clay in the dough, as well as the so-called *siligineus* bread, named *parthicus* or *acquaticus* (Plin. N.H. 22.138), made with good-quality flour (Cael. Aur. Acut. 2. 110), long-life bread for soldiers (*panis militaris*, Plin. N.H. 18.67) and sailors (*panis buccellatus* and *panis nauticus*, Plin. N.H. 22.138), whole wheat bread (*panis autopyrus*, Plin. N.H. 22.138), and bread for dogs (*panis furfureus*, Plin. N.H. 4.18. 84).

Fine food was, instead, the bread called *artolaganus* (Plin. N.H. 18.105), and it included honey, wine, milk, olive oil, candied fruit and pepper (breads with similar ingredients were used also during ritual fasts [Dosi and Schnell 1986, 55], and were similar to the North American version of "fruit cake"). There were also more rustic kinds of breads spread throughout the countryside, where low-quality grains were mixed with legumes (e.g., lentils) and with nuts, such as acorns and chestnuts. The most common Roman bread shape was the rounded, slightly flattened loaf (*pagnotta*), with four or eight cross etchings, which made easier splitting of bread into slices. A total of 81 charred loaves (Roberts 2013, 63-66) were discovered in Pompeii (7.1.36), in the *Modestus* bakery. The rounded loaf with four etchings was named *panis quadratus*, and every wedge was called *quadra* (Hor. Ep. 90.22; Cantarella and Jacobelli 2003, 35).

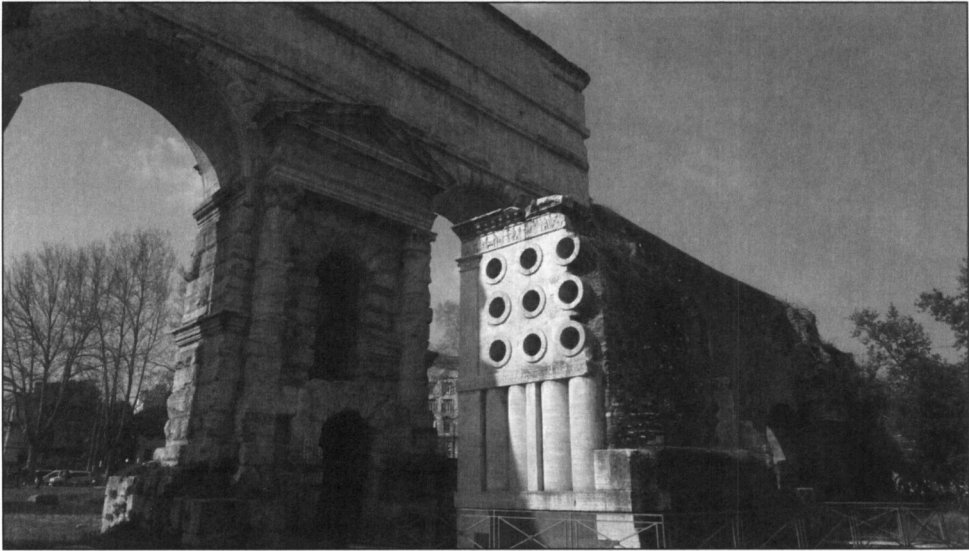
## Production

Originally, baking bread was a domestic activity traditionally associated with women. During the Hellenistic period, the development of technologies, the best quality of flour, and the growing demand for bread led to more specialized production conducted by skilled craftsmen. The first baking machinery in Roman cities dates back to the first decades of the second century B.C. (Plin. N.H. 18.107-108). Bakeries with facilities for milling and baking thrived in Rome during the Republican period and moved in tandem with the building of harbor infrastructures and storehouses for public grains. However, private *pistores* went on with making bread in the richest Roman houses as a sign of wealth and prestige. Initially, bakers were *liberti* (i.e., freed slaves or humble citizens, many of whom were Greek immigrants) because the activity was considered insignificant. Gradually, their social and economic conditions improved notably and bakers obtained privileges through the establishment of a trade association (*collegium pistorum*). Bakers who had started an enterprise could receive public support for purchasing machineries or power sources (i.e., slaves, donkeys, and tools).

They would also have been able to receive Roman citizenship if their production met the requisite high standards. Every city could make a deal with the central government for obtaining public bread (*panis gradilis*); in actuality, it was low-quality bread, partially made of spoiled flour. Furthermore, the State distributed the so-called *panis fiscalis* (bread sold at a fixed price) to the lowest class at a fixed rate (Ampolo 1993, 242).

Baking and bakeries pervaded daily life in Ancient Rome and were palpable in sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste. The large number of bakeries documented in Roman cities can be used as evidence of demand and popularity of bread. Primary sources (i.e., *Cataloghi Regionari*) attest in Rome the presence of more than 260 *pistrina* (bakeries); a total of 32 bakeries have also been excavated in Pompeii (Ceparano 1998, 917-928; Eschebach 1993; La Torre 1988; Mayeske 1974). Indeed, neighborhood bakeries were central landscapes. The characteristic evidence for these bakeries' existence is ovens and millstones (Moritz 1958, 75). The manufacturing of bread included not only the production and baking of doughs (Etienne 1966, 159; Cubberley 1996, 55-67), but also the production of flour (Etienne 1966, 157). A bakery generally had a department for grinding the grain, one for kneading and for leavening, another with aromatic ovens, and frequently a small store for selling the bread. Nearby stables contained animals used for activating millstones and storing grain, and from which odors countered the fresh smell of baking bread. Sometimes, bakeries contained residential quarters; in other cases, domestic buildings were partially retrofitted into bakeries. Preparing the oven and baking bread required time and careful attention. As in the present day, bakeries were noisy and operated during the night, and living close to a bakery would not have been pleasant. Martial (12.57. 4) complains in one of his epigrams that he could not sleep because of the bakers' activities.

The most compelling evidence for illustrating the social status of bakers in the second half of the first century BC is found in the Tomb of Marcus Virgilius Eurysaces in Rome. This also illustrates the different steps of making bread (Brandt 1993, 13-17; Ciancio Rossetto 1973; Mayeske 1974, 14; see also Wilson and Schörle 2009, 101-123, regarding the baker's funerary relief now mounted in the bar of the restaurant Romolo in Trastevere, Rome). Scholars unanimously agree that the baker and baking contractor (*pistor et redemptor*), Eurysaces, was a freed slave (for recent discussions on his legal status, see Hackworth-Petersen 2003, 230-257). He became rich making bread during his lifetime. When he died, he wanted to represent his activity within the upper frieze (decorative panel) along the four sides of the facade of the monumental tomb, which he built for himself and, probably, for his wife, Atinia (Figure 2). According to the Late Republican (first century BC) Roman funeral tradition, monumental tombs were erected along the most important consular streets. The monument is located in Rome, close to Porta Maggiore, where the ancient Via Labicana crossed Via Prenestina. It is worth noting that the tomb was but one funerary monument among many others (Hackworth-Petersen 2003, 240). Moreover, a second – probably more modest – baker's monument was erected in the same area. Indeed, an epitaph, which is the



**Figure 2.** Rome, Eurysaces Tomb. General view of the monument from the south, and east sides.  
Photo by author.

only part preserved of a tomb, mentions Ogulnius, “baker of white bread” (CIL 1207; Ciancio Rossetto 1973, 72-73; Coates-Stephens 2004, 21-31; Coates-Stephens 2005-2006; Hackworth-Petersen 2003, 232; Wilson and Schörle 2009, 111).

At that time, Eurysaces was the most popular bread supplier for soldiers headquartered in Rome and a bread-wholesaler for the Roman state. The following five activities are engraved and, originally, painted on the monument (Figures 2-5): 1) the purchase of grain and its delivering to the baker contractor by the public officials; 2) the milling through two millstones pulled behind by blindfolded donkeys; 3) the transformation of grain into flour; 4) the rolling out of loaves, and finally, 5) the delivery of baked loaves to the shops. Scholars have interpreted the unusual circles as vents for an oven, grain measures or storage container, and grinding and cooking machineries (see Brandt 1993, 15-17 for a review of the literature). The most convincing identifications, however, read them as kneading machines oriented on their sides (Ciancio Rossetto 1973; Hackworth-Petersen 2003, 246).

While the figurative program of Eurysaces’ tomb significantly emphasized the baking profession as the medium for affording wealth and, probably, the *dignitas* of the Roman citizenship, a further sample of a similar attitude is illustrated by a portrayal painted on a wall of a house in Pompeii. In this image, Terentius Neo and his wife – perhaps the owners of the nearby bakery – depict themselves wearing attributes of intellectuals, which speaks of a desire to improve their social standing (Clarke 2003, 261-264; Roberts 2013, 63-66 and 107-108).

### **Sale and Distribution**

Although several aspects concerning nature – public/ private – and management of ancient bakeries have not yet been clarified by scholars, it is possible that consumers could buy fresh loaves every day in one of the several shops that were located around the forum or in commercial neighborhoods



existing in every Roman city. This sort of retailing placed side by side with other kinds of larger distributions managed by the state (i.e., to soldiers and the lowest class) was pervasive.

### **Symbolic Meaning of Bread in Antiquity**

Bread production has always been related to weather, climate, and pests, which were responsible for a plentiful or scant harvest. Furthermore, cereal cultivation requires repetitive activities that occur during the seasonal cycle (i.e., sowing and harvest time). Farmers of every period have organized their lives according to these duties. Bread production represented redemption from hunger, and an attempt to prove human abilities to control the nature and cosmic forces. Not casually, in



**Figure 3.** Rome, Eurysaces Tomb. Relief with scenes of bread-making. West frieze. Photo by author.



**Figure 4.** Rome, Eurysaces Tomb. Relief with scenes of bread-making. South frieze. Photo by author.



**Figure 5.** Rome, Eurysaces Tomb. North frieze. Photo by author.

this regard, the most ancient Roman calendar, as was generally every calendar of agrarian societies, was organized around agro-pastoral festivities (Braconi 2007a, 253-277; Braconi 2007b, 33-48; Marcone 1997, 105-107; Pucci 1989, 369-388).

The repetitiveness of activities related to cereal sowing and harvest has always been associated with ritual (Mento 2003, 5; Palmeri 2007, 5). Worship services connected to agricultural goddesses (i.e., *Ceres* played an important role in the ancient world). Bread, especially unleavened bread, was used in ancient times for making offerings to pagan goddesses as an auspice for a bountiful harvest or soil fertility. Both in ancient pagan and Christian culture, bread has frequently been symbolically related to death. In this regard, bread accompanied the deceased during their journey to the afterlife; several banquet scenes with depictions of different kinds of bread have been discovered in funeral contexts. It is also known that at the beginning of the Christian era, bread became a sacred food par excellence, a medium for the Holy Communion with God. St. Augustine uses bread-making as a metaphor related to the education of a Christian devotee (Montanari 1993, 28-29).

### **Bread-Making in the Contemporary Era**

The turning point for bread production came in the industrial era in Italy and elsewhere between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mechanical dough mixers permitted large-scale production of artificial yeast, which made it easier to form the loaves and gave rise to mass production. During the two World Wars, bread became a luxury item because it was difficult to source flour; farmers and bakers had to leave their activities to join the army. In turn, they were partially substituted by women who tried to continue men's activities by making use of the available mechanical devices.

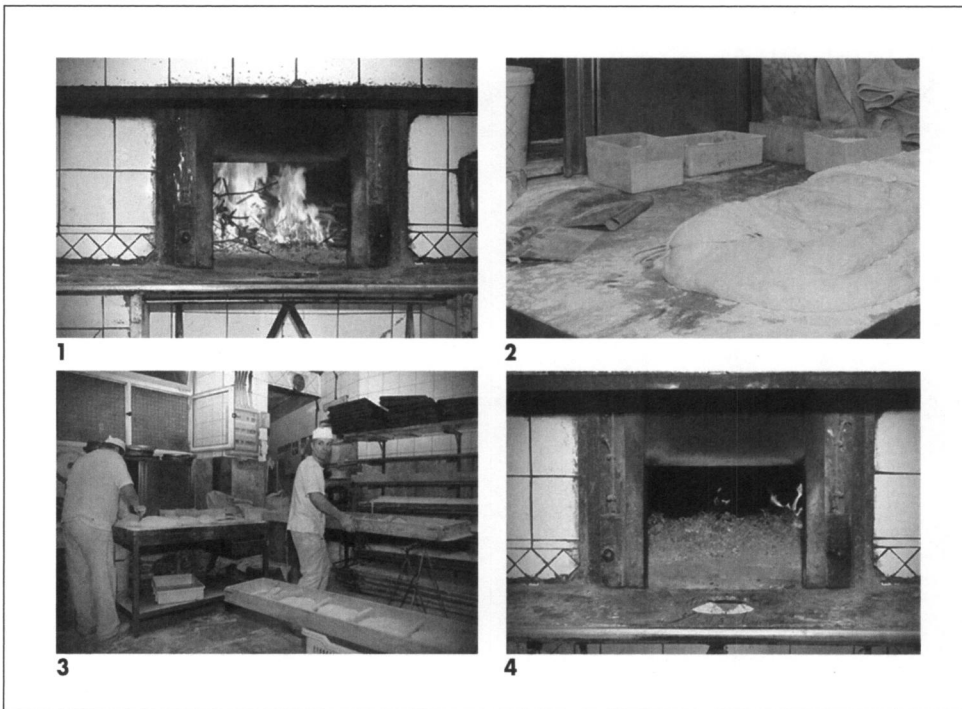
### **Materials, Techniques, and Production**

Considering materials and techniques, which are now applied to bread production in Italy, it is noteworthy that Italian agriculture and cereal production

have been highly influenced by Common Agricultural Politics (i.e., the normative framework), which has regulated agricultural production and sale into the European Union since 1957. As a member of the State of European Union, Italy is obliged to accept European directives and to comply with EU regulations. This includes, for instance, the highly debated production, importation and commercialization of genetically-modified cereals (GMO). At a global scale, biotech crops have been widely introduced and they register continuous growth in the United States and in regions, such as Asia, Latin America, and Africa. As a member of the European Union, Italy cannot restrict bio-tech crop importations, which have been authorized by the EU (according to EU directive 2001/18/CE and Regulations 1829 and 1830/ 2003 CE). As a general rule, Italy cannot forbid bio-tech crop cultivation. However, the market spread of GMO cereals in Italy has been strongly opposed both by consumers and government agencies. Public opinion does not favor the mass production of bio-tech crops.

Cereals used for bread making in Italy, according to culinary traditions in the different regions and to the most recent data offered by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and provided by Monte dei Paschi di Siena Bank, Italy (AA.VV. 2014), include corn, rice, and durum wheat. Consequently, Italian production today boasts more than 250 different breads, and it is as varied as it was in ancient times. There are similarities as well as differences between ancient and modern techniques of bread-making. In general, bread-making begins with kneading dough, named *pasta di pane* (bread pasta), normally made of 100 parts of flour, 40 or 50 parts of water, 0.5 parts of yeast, and 1.5 parts of salt. For preparing the dough, mechanical dough mixers with mobile arms are used for 20-25 minutes. Afterwards, different machineries are used for rolling different shapes of loaves. The leavening process, which already starts during the kneading process, continues in specific leavening rooms or tunnels, where loaves stay for 40-45 minutes. During the leavening, glucose is changed into ethyl alcohol, and lends to spice the bread. Carbon dioxide, which is pinned by the flexibility of flour gluten, causes bread leavening.

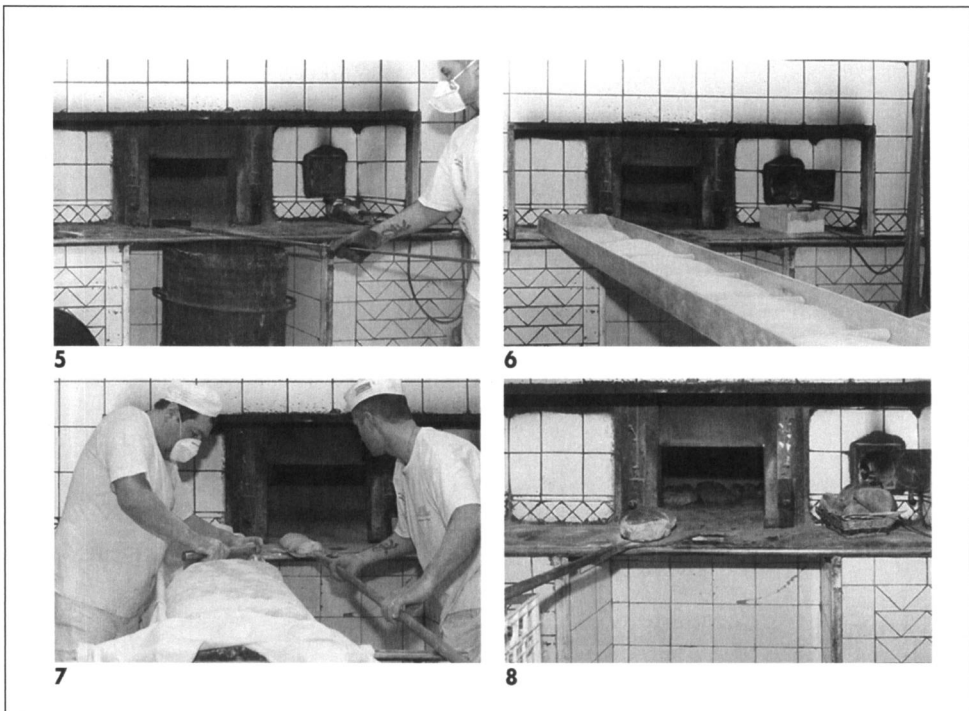
Bread is baked in electric ovens with direct irradiation or steam. During the baking, leavening stops and bread loses water in excess. Baking time depends on bread shape (15-20 minutes for the small ones; 1 hour for the biggest ones). When the bread is ready, it is collected on conveyor belts and placed in specific cooling tunnels. Finally, it reaches stores, where it is weighed, and eventually packaged. Today, the use of wood-burning ovens is very rare; it is preserved only in small villages or in traditional bakeries. The procedure of bread-making in an artisanal bakery implies the following steps: the oven is heated by burning bundles (Figure 6, no 1); leavened dough is shaped into loaves (Figure 6, no. 2); loaves are located in an oblong wooden container; a long fabric prevents contact between the loaves (Figure 6, no 3); embers glow in the oven (Figure 6, no. 4); the oven is cleaned before baking the loaves (Figure 7, no. 5); loaves are put in the oven (Figure 7, nos. 6-7); baked loaves are pulled out of the oven (Figure 7, no. 8).



**Figure 6.** Albano Laziale, Rome. Bread-making procedure in the artisanal bakery (nos.1-2-3-4). Paola Guarino. Photo courtesy of the bakery owner.

### Sales and Distribution

Consumers' and producers' behaviors in purchasing and selling bread, as well as its system of distribution in Italy, have been deeply transformed over time. Until the First World War, bakeries in the modern sense of term (i.e., shops where bread was produced by the baker and directly purchased by the consumer) did not exist. Bakery – a term derived from the word *forno*, meaning oven in Italian, was, indeed, the place where the client brought his homemade dough to be baked. Every family had their own doughs and had their own branding tool for recognizing their loaves. Depending on the social status of the family, the tool used for branding could be made of iron, wood, or pottery. The first innovation occurred during the period between the two World Wars, when the so-called *forno* was changed into *panificio* (i.e., bakery). Economic development and rising consumer purchasing power meant that Italian families could afford to buy loaves that were directly prepared by the baker. Until the 1980s, it was common in Italy to buy bread directly in an artisanal bakery (i.e., a family-run business) where professional competencies were transmitted by father to son throughout the centuries. Both in big cities like Rome, Naples, and Milan, as well as in small villages, every block had a bakery; there, women, normally housewives, or children – to demonstrate the trusting and familiar relation among habitual consumers and bakers – went to purchase the daily fresh bread. The situation is now completely changed. Most working-age adult women are employed outside the home, and everyday rhythms are much more hectic now than during the past. The opening of supermarkets



**Figure 7.** Albano Laziale, Rome. Bread-making procedure in the artisanal bakery (nos.5-6-7-8). Paola Guarino. Photo courtesy of the bakery owner.

and malls, where it is possible to find a vast array of consumer goods, introduced a real revolution in term of consumers' habits and bread-selling. Even though artisanal bakeries have not completely disappeared (Figures 6-7), several of them have been closed because of the more competitive prices of bread in mega stores. Only in some cases have family or mom-and-pop businesses been able to become enterprises, producing bread on an industrial scale for broad distribution. In other cases, both in big and small cities, some historical bakeries have become luxury ateliers, where connoisseurs and tourists can taste high-quality bread. In some ways, bread has gone from the mundane to a show-case spectacle.

### **The Symbolism of Bread in the Contemporary Era**

Bread production and consumption in Italy have assumed a symbolic value, closely connected to everyday life. An historical and anthropological study conducted by Paolo Palmeri (2007, 1-25) has emphasized the importance of bread in its cultural and metaphorical value. Building on the work of Pizza (1992, 112), Palmeri suggests that cultural identity is first a matter of culinary identity. Common traditions related to food and rules regulate food uses and squandering. Food tradition, in turn, frame consumer behavior and build the culture of a territory and its social values. Food taboos are present in every culture; this factor unites, yet diversifies worldwide cultures. Superstitions connected to food frequently address the social structure of human communities, and the relationship between humans and the cosmos.

In this regard, it is interesting to point out that even today bread is considered in Sicily as a “Grace of God” (*Grazia di Dio*); bread is not to be sliced with a knife, and if that is necessary, bread has to be kissed before slicing it. Also, bread should not be turned over on the table because this symbolically means that one is turning their back to God. In different Italian cities, it is forbidden to waste bread; its leftovers can be used for feeding animals or can be preserved for reusing it with other food (Palmeri 2007, 4-5). The very shape of a loaf of bread often assumes symbolic meaning. Many ceremonial breads of Sardinia are shaped as animals, fruits or vegetables; they metaphorically remind the offering of first fruits. These values are also related to life’s evolution and to mating practices linked to sexual reproduction (Palmeri 2007, 6). In Sicily and some places influenced by Sicily, such as Morocco, the consumption of specific kind of breads is associated with the sign of the cross and with a prayer. In Calabria and Sardinia, bread is thrown at the bridegroom in the form of breads or cake during the wedding in order to wish the new married couple fertility. In Sardinia, the gender partition of duties in bread-making has, for a long time, played an important social role. The woman, as a homemaker, coordinates the bread-making process and she is judged as a good wife based on her ability to complete the tasks. From girlhood, women learn the art of kneading dough, taught to them by older women (Palmeri 2007, 10).

Italian popular beliefs, therefore, link bread to everyday material and spiritual life. However, there are also beliefs that link bread to death. In some southern villages, three days after the death of a loved one, relatives and friends of the deceased gather themselves on the tomb and eat a sweet wheat flour bread named *spernà* (i.e., “deceased’s life”), which symbolizes the deceased. The idea is that whoever eats this bread also preserves part of the deceased one’s spirit (Palmeri 2007, 10). In other regions, when a relative passes away, relatives prepare bread, which is distributed among needy people. This is supposedly to help the deceased one’s entry into paradise. As noted above during the antiquity era – bread continues to have a religious value in some regional contexts. In Christian communities, bread is used as an offering to patron saints. In this case, it is blessed bread. Made by women, it is eaten or crumbled on fields for invoking a good harvest. In some Italian villages, finally, people believe that bread has a therapeutic power in combatting rheumatisms (Palmeri 2007, 10).

## Conclusion

Bread-making, selling, and consumption in Italy reflect myriad social, geographical, and anthropological meanings over the past two millennia. Bread has been a staple throughout the centuries, whose value is reflected in many ritual and symbolic meanings that consumers of different eras have always bestowed upon it. Two antithetic attitudes prevail among consumers in both ancient and contemporary times. On the one hand, bread-making reflects human attempts to surmount the difficulties of its production, starting from efforts in transforming the landscape in order to create the best conditions for cereal cultivation, to technological achievement for improving and rendering competitive bread production. On the other hand, the symbolic value of bread and the persistence of millenarian

traditions in several Italian beliefs and actions related to its use and consumption portray extremely conservative behaviors, often derived from antiquity. Changing attitudes toward bread consumption reflect a never-ending process of symbolization and re-symbolization of cultural values connected with bread and new lifestyles (Palmeri 2007, 19-25). New symbolic meanings associated with bread subvert previous ones from the ancient era. In the past, consumers who were obliged to eat purchased bread were considered indigent. At the same time, eating white bread was considered a sign of infirmity. In the modern era, the chance to purchase bread, especially white bread, has become a status marker for identifying wealthy citizens (Palmeri 2007, 19; Seppilli 1992, 200). The location of bread production also conveys powerful meanings. Whereas making bread at home was once a sign of backwardness, nowadays homemade bread is considered a luxury, harking back to ancient times. The once popular attitude of not wasting bread has, regrettably, become obsolete today. What is conspicuous today is the amount of bread that is thrown away. While the centuries-old saying “*Non si vive di solo pane*” (“One does not live by bread alone”) still holds true today, understanding the role of our daily bread over time provides a useful window to matters of consumption and social change.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my gratitude to the editors, Sara Beth Keough and Joseph Scarpaci, and express my warmest thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Massimiliano and Romina Semioli, to Virgilio, and Alberto (owners and bakers of the artisanal bakery “Panificio Brillo”, Albano Laziale, Rome, Italy) for giving me the permission to follow and to take pictures of the bread-making procedure. I would never have had the possibility to do that without the professional support of Paola Guarino, who is the author of the photographs. I am also very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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