

SESSION 1 : MILK AND ORIGINS: MILK OF MAN, MILK OF THE GODS

Presided by Jean-Denis Vigne

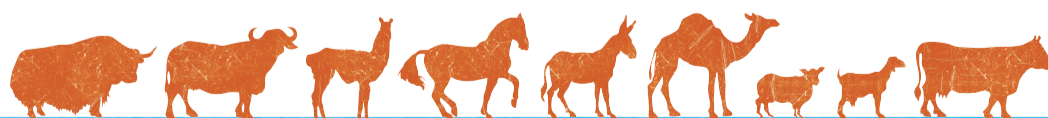
Ewes and Nanny-Goats, the Unloved Nurturers of Ancient Greek Literature

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Ancient Greece may have enjoyed a favorable climate, but **its soil was rocky and hardly conducive to farming. The mountains carved out a country with very deep valleys and a soil with poor humus content.** The Greeks always lived in fear of a wheat shortage and grain routes were of given utmost to their commercial markets. Furthermore, arboriculture, which was practiced early on there, certain produced wine and olive oil, but one had to be already rich to undertake to start an enterprise that required many years before the first harvests. Nor could these trees be planted at higher elevations; they could not go farther than halfway up the slopes. Many of the plains were thus monopolized by olive groves and vineyards. **Farming was hence difficult and small peasants usually had to settle for mixed subsistence farming with small livestock that could manure the land and make up for the rigors of an unfertile soil.**

And yet, when we think of Greece, we think of Athena's olive oil, Dionysius' wine and Demeter's cereal grains, the typical Mediterranean trilogy. This is what the Greeks were the proudest of and what they tirelessly extolled in their literature. **This literature creates an illusion, because it leads us to believe that the Greeks all had unlimited access to wine, bread and olive oil, to agricultural produce of the noblest sort. Actually, the Greeks largely lived as much from animal husbandry as from agriculture.** This is only logical given the aforementioned context: shallow, rocky topsoil unsuitable for wheat but well adapted to small-scale breeding, mainly of sheep and goats (for there was little large livestock, and labor cattle gives little milk) – milk and dairy farming like many civilizations in their vicinity. But all these herds that scoured the hills are paid little homage. Milk did not enjoy the same prestige among the Greeks as did the juice of the vine and the olive. And the best known shepherd in their literature is probably Homer's Cyclops, revisited by countless authors in the following centuries, a monstrous and cannibalistic creature, proof of the wariness inspired by those who devoted themselves exclusively to such activity. We thus intend **to describe the Greek reality and understand why the Greeks demonstrated such reticence with respect to an activity – and a food product – that supplied their diet with most of its protein.**

Two products consumed by the Greeks will be studied — milk and cheese —, while keeping in mind two main threads: first, the symbolic power of food that conditions how the Greeks viewed it. What did milk represent to them? **Is a liquid given by an animal without there being any need to do anything to it, a product that required no *technè*, worthy of a “civilized” people whom Prometheus,** according to the myth, endowed with the ability to act upon nature and transform it, to whom Athena and Dionysos gave the olive tree and the grape vine to graft and cultivate? The purity of milk is unquestionable, it contains that perfection worthy of a golden age in which Nature supplies all that is needed, but who should consume it and how? Then **there is the Greeks' medical knowledge, especially Hippocrates' principles, taken up by Galen and many others,** who endowed food with the status both of *nutriment* (a branch of nutrition) that helped foster the body's development and reproduction (one thus had to understand what the body did with food) as well as *pharmacon* (branch of pharmacology);



wherefore the need to understand how food acted on the body in that *pharmaca* can either be poisons (when they can't be assimilated or when they are corrupt and corrupt the body), or remedies when they warm the body without harming it, or when they act on the body by being assimilated, thus playing the role both of nutriment and *pharmacon*, here in the positive sense of the term. What of milk and cheese in this context? That depends on how these foods were used...

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Advanced degree in grammar, PhD in Greek philology, professor of classical antiquity at the University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada. Her training in philology has led her to translate and comment many ancient writings that had not yet been available in French. Her historical research has prompted her to publish extensively on the social and cultural history of ancient Greece. She has devoted many articles to dairy products, «Du Prince au berger, tout homme a son content de fromage," *Revue d'Etudes Grecques*, 2000, 1- 40, and «Le lait des Grecs, boisson divine ou barbare?» *Dialogues d'Histoire ancienne*, 27/1, 2001, 131-157, among others. She is also the author of «La trilogie céréales-vignes-oliviers, frontière illusoire entre Grecs et Barbares» in the edited volume *Les Frontières alimentaires* (J.R Pitte and M. Montanari eds, Paris, CNRS, 2009, p. 15-37) and «Changement de diète en Grèce ancienne: nouveaux besoins, nouvelles habitudes, nouvelle civilisation?" *Société et Économie en Grèce*, 2007, p. 1-19. In other areas, she recently published *Les Athéniens à l'époque classique*, Editions Boréal, 128 p., Montreal, 2005, and *L'histoire humaine des animaux de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, Ellipses, Paris, 2009.