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"Gathering, hunting, fishing: The Procurement of Food from the Non-domesticated Animal Kingdom of Cyprus"

The island of Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean is today considered a tourist's paradise, mostly because of its sun and sea and pleasant climate. Cyprus is also famous for her fruit and wine, a fame that goes back to Antiquity. It is true that the island is generally fertile and blessed with many natural resources, and, given the right conditions, it can and has been called "makaria", that is, blessed. The balance, however, is a very delicate one and was easily upset, especially in the areas of the island where summer temperatures are very high, and winter ones fairly low. Prevailing conditions were often harsh and led to the decimation of the population. The situation was often made more acute by the long periods of mal-administration and heavy taxation imposed by the different foreign rulers. The main and constant natural factor that led to the impoverishment of the population was the lack of water. The island has no natural rivers or lakes and all water supplies depend on rainfall. Long periods of drought are documented from Antiquity down to the present day. Add to this the more than frequent natural disasters in the form of plague and, above all, earthquakes and locust attacks. Two of the worst, documented outbreaks of plague are those of 1692 and 1759-60, when, in the first case, two-thirds, and, in the second, one-third of the inhabitants are said to have died.[i] Earthquakes are too frequent to enumerate and the devastation they caused is well documented from ancient times onwards - although as we move closer to modern times, their effects appear to have been less and less disastrous.[ii] Earthquakes cannot, of course, be controlled by man, but the other scourge of Cyprus, namely locust attacks, can. Locust attacks on Cyprus are documented, together with earthquakes, already in the Sibylline Oracles of the 2nd/3rd century A.D.[iii], and the situation is better known from later times when dense clouds of these insects ate everything on their way. One of the worst locust attacks culminated in 1628,

after the insects had paid regular visits to the island for 18 years.[iv] The first effective measures against locusts were taken in 1870 through the rich Italo-Cypriot Richard Mattei and the Turkish Governor Said Pasha.[v] In 1881, under British administration now, the problem began to be effectively confronted through the passing of the Locust Destruction Law.[vi]

When conditions like the above prevailed, there was a general failure of crops and a devastation of domesticated stock. For these reasons the Cypriots learned how to survive by using what they could find in nature. And this was a situation that continued well into our century and certainly up to the Second World War. Naturally, food collected in this way was never plentiful as illustrated by the following folk verses: Τού τσυνηού η κούππα του τζαί τού ψαρά τό πιάτον, σαράντα μέρες όφκερον τζαί μιάφ φοράν γεμάτον (A hunter's bowl and a fisherman's plate are forty times empty and only one day full). The situation is also clearly stated in the First Report of the "Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire", presented to the Parliament in London in 1939, according to which a considerable number of the rural population was definitely underfed and liable to infectious and epidemic diseases - the main cause of dietary deficiency being poverty.

The surviving evidence for the exploitation of what nature had to offer is rather inconsistent until one reaches the 18th century when pilgrims and travellers passing through the island left accounts of the people and their eating habits. The present paper presents a rough overview of this evidence and attempts to relate it, on one hand, to what is known from Antiquity and, on the other, to existing traditions, as well as to our personal research and experience. It deals with the animal kingdom from its most humble members up to mammals, in an attempt to complement Mr. N. Andilios' paper dealing with the vegetable kingdom - but also in an attempt to record traditions that have already died out and which are now being forgotten.

Small shells are plentiful and are commonly found on ancient sites either in rubbish pits or as tomb offerings. The

latter sometimes include large species like St James' scallop (Pecten jacopaeus) and the Triton or Trumpet shell (Charonia sequenze).[vii] We assume that these were eaten cooked, but smaller shells were probably eaten uncooked. This is how limpets and whelks are eaten today, the flavour brought out by a squeeze of lemon. Whelks, in particular, are considered a great accompaniment to local brandy and other drinks. Land snails were also widely consumed and were also used as tomb offerings in ancient times,[viii] and they continue to be a great delicacy for poor and rich today. Magda Ohnefalsch-Richter, writing in the late 19th century documents that snails form one of the most important kinds of nutrition of the populace, that they are delicious cooked with rice and tomato and that those of the large variety were eaten roasted on skewers.[ix] Large snails are still eaten today in this way, skewered together with a particular variety of wild mushroom that grows under the giant fennel (Ferula communis). Snails were and are still also eaten boiled and doused with vinegar, cooked with "bourgouri" (crushed wheat), or fried in batter and accompanied by garlic paste.[x]

Remnants of sea urchins and crabs are commonly found on ancient sites, and presumably continued to be eaten through the ages, but their consumption is not documented. Sea urchins are sometimes eaten today, uncooked with a squeeze of lemon, as are the transparent ghost crabs (Ocypode cursor), while sea crabs are cooked on charcoal or passed in flour and fried. Another kind of crab (Potamion potamios) was also commonly found in brooks and springs and this too was eaten on the charcoal or fried. This animal, however, is nowadays practically extinct because of over-fishing and, above all, through DDT (earlier this century) and other pesticides.

Another animal associated with rivulets is the eel (Anguilla anguilla). This too is nowadays practically extinct, but in the past eels were so numerous that the authorities found it profitable to impose a 10% tax on their fishing. Several ways of catching eels are documented. One was with the use of branches of thorny broom (Genista acanthoclados), in the spikes of which the passing eel was hooked. Another simple way

was with the use a large fork with three or four prongs; yet another made use of special basket/traps placed in narrow passages in the streams; but, perhaps the most efficient, was that using the eel catcher, which are wooden tongs fitted with nails (Fig. 1). Eels were more easily caught if a mixture of ground berries of Styrax officinalis was first thrown in the water. The narcotic properties of this plant numbed the eels and made them easier to catch. Eels were skinned and eaten boiled, roasted in hot ashes, or fried in olive oil. [xi] They were also preserved by using salting and smoking.

The octopus was commonly represented in ancient art, above all on Mycenean pottery, and its consumption is well documented (though not specifically for Cyprus). The 4th century B.C. Cypriot philosopher Klearchos of Soloi, says that the octopus has a weakness for figs and olives, and an easy way to catch it is by immersing an olive branch in the water to which the animal soon attaches itself.[xii] Another method, employed until recently, was that using an iron rod, 10-15cm long, fitted with a series of fishing hooks, which were masked behind a white handkerchief. The octopus attracted by the white cloth became unwittingly attached to the hidden hooks.[xiii] More commonly, the octopus is speared with a large prong, after being lured by the light coming from a torch held by the fisherman. The octopus can be boiled and pickled in vinegar, or sun-dried with thyme and cooked on the charcoal. It is served with olive oil and lemon. It can also be cooked fresh in a variety of ways. One is with wine, cinnamon, bay leaves, cloves and pepper corns, another with wine and onions, and yet another with tomato paste.

Although fish is commonly represented in ancient Cypriot art, the island is not particularly rich in sea-life, and fish was practically unknown to people living far from the coast. All the same, fish did form a supplement to diet since very ancient times, and large numbers of fish bones are commonly found during excavation. In fact, one of the earliest objects made of metal found on the island, is a bronze fishing hook from the Chalcolithic settlement of Kissonerga-Mosphilia, dating to around 3500 B.C.[xiv] Information relating to more

recent times is rather contradictory. In the Consular Report of 1859, for example, we read that "Le poisson est tres-abondant mais il y a peu de pecheurs".[xv] Drummond, writing in 1750 and describing a small harbour near Ayia Napa, gives more details on fishing: "... the poor people employ themselves in fishing, with boats of a very particular texture, consisting of a few sticks bound together, with some very small ones laid in the hollow where the fisherman sits managing his tackle, and steering his machine with a paddle".[xvi] Several methods were used for catching fish, many of them common everywhere in the Mediterranean. An unusual method of special interest, is that using the "skarka". The contraption takes its name from skaros, the parrot fish (Euscarius cretensis), but "skarkes" of different sizes and different thickness of weave are used for different fish. They were traditionally made with thin branches of myrtle (Myrtus communis), although metal wire predominates in more recent years. About half of the "skarka" is filled with leaves of different plants, or even a paste of flour and whey. Leaves commonly used are those of the Persian lilac (Melia azadarach) which have narcotic powers. The "skarka" is then dropped in the sea, and, if all goes well, a few hours later, it is full of fish.

Fish were roasted, fried, boiled, marinated, cooked in earthen pot with oil and onions, or baked in the oven with tomatoes, onions and parsley.[xvii]

Birds were caught in a variety of ways common to many parts of the world. One method that has, unfortunately, persisted into our age is that using lime-sticks, a very ancient method described by the 2nd/3rd century A.D. writer Aelian.[xviii] It is not known when their use was introduced to Cyprus, although there is a theory that the depiction on an 8th century B.C. vase, shows men hiding and waiting for the birds to sit on the lime-sticks they have laid.[xix] The way "verka" (lime-sticks) are made today similar to that described by Aelian. One takes thin straight shoots of the olive tree and dips them in a thick mixture made by boiling the crushed berries of the glue tree (Cordia mixa) with honey. The lime-sticks are carried in a special long and cylindrical basket

made of cane, and are placed on a tree or anywhere else a small bird might sit and get glued to them. This method of catching birds was very widely used until recently, but it is now officially (though not effectively) forbidden by law. The main victims of this method were small birds of all kinds, that formed a staple supplement to the poor Cypriot's diet. As from the 15th century, when the Venetians took Cyprus, one of these birds, the ortolan or beccafico, became a great delicacy, and left the poor man's plate to end up in princely dinners in Venice and elsewhere. These birds, autumnal visitors to Cyprus, despite their minute size, are characterized by their plumpness, since they feed on grapes, figs and lentisk seeds (Fig. 2). In fact, in Cyprus one still calls a plumb baby "ambelopoulli", that is "beccafico". John Locke, who visited Cyprus in 1553, we hear the following: "They have also in the Island a certaine small bird much like unto a Wagtaile in fethers and making, these are so extremely fat that you can perceive nothing els in all their bodies.... They take great quantitie of them and they use to pickle them with vinegar and salt, and to put them in pots and send them to Venice and other places of Italy for present of great estimation. They say they send almost 1200 jarres or pots to Venice, besides those which are consumed on the Island, which are a great number. These are so plentifull that when there is no shipping, you may buy them for 10 Carchies, which coine are 4 to a Venetian Soldo, which os peny farthing the dozen, and when there is store of shipping, 2 pence the dozen, after the rate of their money".[xx] Over two hundred years later the Abbe Giovanni Mariti, who stayed in Cyprus between 1760-1767, informs us that the sale of little birds was in the hands of the Europeans at Larnaca, who continually received commissions from throughout Europe and "every year 400 little barrels are exported, some containing 200, others 400 birds".[xxi] The Abbe Mariti also mentions the then common way of preparing beccafichos, which involved cutting them into two and putting them on the gridiron with bread crumbs and a little parsley. The traditional way of preparing beccafichos is to scald them to remove the feathers and either boil them and eat them whole with "bourgouri"

(crushed wheat) which has been cooked in their rich broth, or pickled in vinegar.[xxii] Commandaria wine (the rich, local dessert wine) was sometimes added to or even replaced vinegar. The herbs the birds eat or which are added to them during preparation give them a very special flavour.

Although the bird population of the island is now sadly depleted, hunting used to be abundant. Among the birds hunted, the most common were francolins, red-legged partridges, quails, wood cocks, snipes, thrushes and every kind of water fowl.[xxiii] These birds were traditionally eaten boiled, grilled on the charcoal, fried or even pickled in vinegar. For some of them, like for example partridges, special recipes remain in favour, involving "halloumi" (local goat cheese) and celery.

In relation to birds, eggs can also be mentioned. Their use in antiquity is documented in tomb offerings,[xxiv] and, naturally, eggs of all kinds remained part of stable diet throughout the ages. These were commonly eaten fried mixed with herbs and different kinds of greens, like wild asparagus, "lapsanes" (charlock, Sinapis arvensis), "strouthouthkia" (bladder campion, Silene vulgaris) etc. Boiled eggs were and still are also preserved in vinegar.

The last groups of food from nature that we are going to examine are reptiles and mammals. There is no written or oral tradition whatsoever relating to the eating of snakes and lizards, that abound on the island, nor to rats or mice. However, although we have found no written record for the consumption of the hedgehogs and sea turtles, one of the authors (D.M.) remembers that when he was a child people still ate both these animals boiled as a soup, and, in the case of the hedgehog, also roasted with potatoes. The eggs of sea-turtles were also eaten until not long ago.

Hare was always the most common game, and its hunting and eating was considered a great pleasure. It is well documented in Antiquity, and its hunting is often illustrated, as for example in a Roman mosaic from the House of Dionysos in Paphos, where the skilled hunter is about to catch it with his bare hands.[xxv] The more orthodox ancient way was, of course, that using the lagobolon, the club-like or curved-topped throwing-

stick, like the one held by Pan in the mosaic of the Dionysiac Procession yet again from the Roman House of Dionysos in Paphos.[xxvi] Dogs naturally accompanied the hunter then as in later times when the hare was hunted with fire arms. Magda Ohnefalsch-Richter at the end of the 19th century, mentions that the hunting dogs she saw in Cyprus were descendants of the race introduced by French knights in the Middle Ages, when the nobility of Cyprus used to hunt using dogs and a strange kind of leopard, but also falcons - something often depicted on the glazed pottery of the period.[xxvii] Several travellers mention hare as game, and Samuel Baker in 1879 confesses that he never tasted any game so delicious as the Cyprian hare. He says that "the flesh is exceedingly rich and possesses a particularly gamey flavour owing to the aromatic food upon which they live".[xxviii] No written recipe from the past seems to survive but, traditionally, the hare is eaten "stifado", that is cooked with vinegar and onions, perfumed with cinnamon and bay leaves, or simply pickled in vinegar.

With only one exception, all the larger mammals that lived on the island have become extinct. Pygmy hippopotami and elephants were already wiped out by hunters in 8.000 B.C.[xxix] The deer plentiful in Antiquity right up to the Renaissance, when it is mentioned and illustrated by several travellers, has been extinct for several centuries now, while the wild boar, a very highly prized game was hunted down to extinction as late as the 1930s.[xxx] In fact, the only large mammal still living in the wild on Cyprus is the moufflon (Fig. 3). Strictly speaking, the moufflon is not a wild animal but a feral descendent of caprids. It has, however, lived in the wild for thousands of years. It was hunted for its meat and became practically extinct, until it was protected by law in 1938.[xxxi] Unfortunately, we have not been able to trace any special recipes for preparing the deer, the wild boar or the moufflon.

Generally speaking then, the surviving evidence comes to confirm Magda Ohnefalsch-Richter's words, who at the end of the 19th century said: "The Cypriot shoots and eats whatever flies in the sky and walks on earth".[xxxii] The ways these things were prepared by the common people are usually rather

straightforward. They were simply pickled, boiled, fried, grilled or roasted, but with the addition of the crucial spice or herb that brings out the flavour. These seasonings include pepper corns, thyme, mint, cumin, coriander, bay leaves, cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves - as well as tomato sauce. Rich and complicated sauces are a modern introduction and belong to a more affluent society.

In conclusion we would like to make the following observation: Many of the things mentioned above were eaten by a generally very poor society. This is no more the case in Cyprus. In fact, most Cypriots would shudder at the mere thought of eating a hedgehog or a live ghost crab. Some other of these creatures, however, although starting as a supplement or even as the basis of a poor man's diet, have now become great delicacies, consumed by everybody. Snails and sea crabs fall in this category, but, above all, beccaficos. These tiny birds, despite the fact that their catching is now illegal, can still be found fairly easily. Their price is and has been, even before the ban on their hunting, outrageously high, reaching up to 1.50 Cypriot pounds, that is about 3 dollars for each tiny bird which is no more than a small mouthful.

Illustrations:

1. Eel catcher, Folk Art Museum, Yeroskipou (Department of Antiquities).

2. Beccafico (Pavlos Neophytou)

3. Moufflon (----------)

i. Hill, Sir G., A history of Cyprus Vol. IV: The Ottoman province, the British colony, 1571-1948, Cambridge, 1952, 67 n. 1.

ii. For Antiquity, see Hill, Sir G., A history of Cyprus, Vol. I: To the conquest by Richard Lion Heart, Cambridge, 1940, 244-5 and passim.; Soren, D. and Lane, E., "New ideas about the destruction of Paphos", Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus (1981), 178-183; Soren, D. and Davis, Th., "Seismic archaeology at Kourion: The 1984 campaign", Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus (1985), 286-292; Soren, D., "The day the world ended at Kourion. Reconstructing an ancient earthquake", National Geographic, 174:1 (July 1988), 30-53. For later times see Hill, Sir G., A history of Cyprus, Vol. IV: The Ottoman province, the British colony, 1571-1948, Cambridge, 1952, 67 n. 1.

iii. J. Geffcken (ed.), Oracula Sibyllina. Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, Leipzig, 1902, 5.449-454. See also the 12th century Eustathios of Salonica, Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem et Odysseam, ad fidem exempli Romani [editi], Leipzig, 1825-30, 1220.30 (Φ 12).

iv. Hill, Sir G., A history of Cyprus, Vol. IV: The Ottoman province, the British colony, 1571-1948, Cambridge, 1952, 67; see also Dawkins, R.M. (ed.), Leontios Makhairas, "Recital concerning the sweet island of Cyprus entitled `Chronicle', Vol. II, Oxford, 1932, 69.

v. Hill, Sir G., op.cit., 250 n. 1, 298 n. 2.

vi. Storrs, Sir R., A Chronology of Cyprus, Nicosia, 1930, 30-31.

vii. Michaelides, D., "Food in ancient Cyprus", in P. Lysaght (ed.), Food and the traveller. Migration, immigration, tourism and ethnic food. Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the International Commission for Ethnological Food Research, Cyprus, June 8-14, 1996, Nicosia, 1998, 28.

viii. Karageorghis, V., "Chroniques de fouilles et decouvertes archeologiques a Chypre en 1981", Bulletin de Correspondance Hellenique, 106 (1982), 726-7, fig. 94.

ix. Ohnefalsch-Richter, M., Griechische Sitten und Gebrauche auf Cypern, Berlin, 1913, Greek translation and commentary by A. G. Marangou, Nicosia, 1994, 143.

x. Kyriakou, S., "Λαογραφικά από την Τάλα. Οι καράολοι", Laografike Kypros, 36 (1986), 232; Philippou, M., "Λαογραφικά από το Βαρώσι. Οι συμίριοι", Laografike Kypros, 37 (1987), 138.

xi. Kyprianou, Chr., "Λαογραφικά Τσακκίστρας: Πώς πιάνουν τα 'ασσιέλια'", Laographike Kypros, 26 (1979), 69; Ioannou, Th., "Τα 'ασσιέλλια'", Laographike Kypros, 28-30 (1980), 96.

xii. In Athenaios, Deipnosophistai, 7.317 b, c, d.

xiii. Yiannoukos, S., "Λαογραφικά από το Παραλίμνι και τη Δερύνεια: Η ψαρική τέχνη", Laographike Kypros, 39 (1989), 75.

xiv. E.J. Peltenburg, "Lemba Archaeological Project, Cyprus, 1978: Preliminary Report", Levant, 12 (1980), 1-21, esp. 4, pl. Ib.

xv. Papadopoullos, Th. (ed.), Προξενικά 'Εγγραφα τού ΙΘ' αιώνος (Consular Reports of the 19th century), Nicosia, 1980, 38.

xvi. A. Drummond, Travels through different cities of Germany, Italy, Greece and several parts of Asia...., London, 1754. See C.D. Cobham, Excerpta Cypria: Materials for a history of Cyprus, Cambridge, 1908, 302.

xvii. Xioutas, P., "Μαγειρική τών ιχθύων", Laographike Kypros, 43 (1993), 114-116.

xviii.

xix. Loulloupis, M., "Hunting scenes on Cypriot vases of the

geometric period", in E. Peltenburg (ed.), Early society in Cyprus, Edinburgh, 1989, 171-9.

xx. John Locke in C.D. Cobham, Excerpta Cypria: Materials for a history of Cyprus, Cambridge, 1908, 72.

xxi. Mariti, G., Travels in the island of Cyprus. Translated from the Italian [Lucca, 1769] by C.D. Cobham, London, 1869; London 1971 edition, 13-14.

xxii. Evangelatou, Ph., Ξεχασμένες νοστιμιές του κυπριακού χωριού (Forgotten delicacies of the Cypriot village), Limassol, n.d. (but c. 1998), 138.

xxiii. See Mariti, loc. cit.; and Heyman (18th century), Kinneir (1814) and Turner (1815), in C.D. Cobham, Excerpta Cypria: Materials for a history of Cyprus, Cambridge, 1908, 247-248, 414, 445 respectively.

xxiv. E.g., in Tombs 3 and 50 at Salamis: Karageorghis, V., Excavations in the Necropolis of Salamis III, Nicosia, 1967, 33, 40-1, 130-1, Plate XXXIV, and p. 106, Plate XVC:4-5 respectively. See also, Michaelides, D., op. cit. (note 7 above), 24, Fig. 3.

xxv. Michaelides, D., Cypriot Mosaics, Nicosia, 1992, 29, Fig. 11c. See also, Michaelides, op. cit. (note 7 above), 24, fig. 2.

xxvi. Michaelides, D., Cypriot Mosaics, Nicosia, 1992, 28, Figs. 10-11.

xxvii. M. Ohnefalsch-Richter, Griechische Sitten und Gebrauche auf Cypern, Berlin, 1913. Greek translation and edition by A. Marangou, Nicosia 1994, 137. For the pottery see, D. Papanicola-Bakirtzi,"Γεράκια και γερακάρηδες σε κυπριακά μεσαιωνικά εφυαλωμένα αγγεία" (Falcons and falconers in Cypriot medieval glazed pottery), in Acts of the 2nd International Cyprological Conference: B: Medieval section, Nicosia, 1986, 567-575; eadem, Μεσαιωνική εφυαλωμένη κεραμεική της Κύπρου. Τα εργαστήρια Πάφου και Λαπήθου (The Medieval glazed pottery of Cyprus. The workshops of Paphos and Lapethos), Salonica, 1996, Pl. IVa (in colour).

xxviii. Baker, Sir S., Cyprus as I saw it in 1789, London, 1879, 121.

xxix. Simmons, A., "Preliminary report on the Akrotiri Peninsula Survey, 1991", Report of the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus (1992), 9-11.

xxx. Michaelides, D., "Food in ancient Cyprus", in P. Lysaght (ed.), Food and the traveller. Migration, immigration, tourism and ethnic food. Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the International Commission for Ethnological Food Research, Cyprus,

June 8-14, 1996, Nicosia, 1998, 24 with references.

xxxi. Michaelides, D., loc.cit.

xxxii. Ohnefalsch-Richter, M., op. cit., 139.