

MAZA, "BARLEY-CAKE"

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Summary: Despite the consensus of ancient and modern authorities, μάζα, "barley-cake" cannot be from μάσσω, "I knead". Rather, as has been suggested, but not well justified until now, the word comes from Hebrew *matstsāh*, "unleavened bread".

The etymology of μάζα would seem to have been settled already in antiquity, for several authors link it in a *figura etymologica* with μάσσω, "to knead" (perhaps cognate with Sanskrit *mac*, "to cheat, pound or grind" and Latin *mācero*, "to tenderize"). So Archilochus fr. 2 IEG²:

ἐν δορὶ μὲν μοι μάζα μεμαγμένη, ἐν δορὶ δ' οἶνος
Ἰσμαρικός· πίνω δ' ἐν δορὶ κεκλιμένος.

Despite the many interpretations of the poem's first four words – which include "in a tree", "earned by my spear", "in my ship", "in the pillory", "while on guard duty", "on wood", "hanging in a bundle tied to my spear", "lying on my spear" and "in battle-readiness" (Gerber 1976: 86-87 and 1987: 87-88) – it is clear that Archilochus here implies some connection between barley-cakes and kneading. Herodotus 1.200 similarly describes Babylonian fish-cakes (μάζαν μαζάμενος), a phrase echoed twice in Aristophanes¹ and in the proverb μάζαν ἐαυτῷ μεμαγμένην ξὺν πολλῷ τῷ πόνῳ (Theodorus Metochita *Misc.* p. 559 Miller).

The *figura etymologica* is common, e.g. οἱ δ' ἰστὸν στήσαντ' (Il. 1.480), τέμενος τάμον (6.194) and νηὸν ἔνασσαν (*Hymn.*

¹ ἐμοῦ/ μάζαν μεμαγμένος (*Eq.* 54-55 [424 B.C.]) and ἄλλην (scil. μάζαν) [RV, but ΠΓ read ἀλλ' ἦν] μή μοι ταχὺ μάξη, *Vesp.* 614 (422 B.C.).

Hom. Ap. 298). Often, as in the examples just cited, the figure exploits an implicit link between words accepted by modern scientific scholarship. It is not surprising, then, that following Archilochus' lead, Liddell-Scott-Jones (1968: 1072) and Chantraine (1974: 657) explain μάζα as *μᾶγ- γα from the root of μάσσω. Indeed, superficial similarities of form and meaning lend credibility to their view. Poets are not scholars, however, and ancient etymology was anything but scientific (Woodbury 1980: 114 n. 12 = 1991: 341 n. 12 with bibl.). It is worth prying a little more deeply, therefore, into whether or not Archilochus' and later authors' implied derivation is correct.

Three formal considerations suggest that it is not. First, on this theory the quantity of the initial alpha remains unexplained, as Chantraine admits, though a parallel phenomenon does occur in μείζων < *μέγων (West 1978: 307 ad Hes. *Op.* 590).

Then too there are several Greek verbs in -άσσω, all of which have cognate substantives, and in every case the noun contains a velar (/g/ or /k/, sometimes in the compound /s/ = /ks/). For example:

πράσσω, "I make" / πρᾶγμα, "matter"
 τaráσσω, "I disturb" / ἄταραξία, "impassiveness"
 τάσσω, "I arrange" / τάξις, "line of battle"
 φυλάσσω, "I guard" / φύλαξ, "guard"
 χαράσσω, "I scratch" / χαρακτήρ, "engraved mark".

Even in the case of μάσσω, its derivatives (except for the putative μάζα) also all have the same characteristic:

ἐκμαγεῖον, "napkin"
 μαγεύς, "one who kneads"
 μάγμα, "thick unguent"
 μάκτης, "one who kneads"
 μακτός, ἦ, ὄν, "kneaded"
 μάκτρα, "kneading-trough".

Μᾶζα is the sole exception to this pattern.

Conversely, there are only four other nouns in -αζα in Greek: the rare and lexically isolated ἄζα, which means "dirt" in Homer (*Od.* 22.184), though it seems to mean "heat" elsewhere; γάζα, "treasure" (Theoph. *HP* 8.11.5), which Pomponius Mela (1.64) claims to be a loan-word from Persian (cf. Persian *ganj*); γράζα a word of uncertain meaning attested only in Hesychius; and the word for "hail", χαλάζα (*Il.* 10.6, etc.). Of these, only the last is at all common; the corresponding verb is χαλαζάω, not – as we might expect if μᾶζα indeed came from μάσσω – *χαλάσσω.

In terms of sense, too, there is a problem. Of course barley cakes are kneaded, but this is hardly their defining characteristic, for so too is wheat bread (ἄρτος). In fact, the distinction between μᾶζα and ἄρτος, both types of (kneaded) cake, is well established in Greek (cf. *Ar. Pax* 853, *Eccl.* 606, *Cratin.* fr. 176.2 *PCG*, *Telecl.* fr. 1.4 *PCG*, *Nicophon* fr. 6.1 *PCG*, and *Pl. Resp.* 372 b; Olson 1998: 67-68 ad *Ar. Pax* 1). Barley (κριθή) is the most ancient grain (Theophr. In *Porph. Abst.* 2.6), which explains its use in religion: its groats (οὔλαι) are scattered on animals before sacrifice (*Il.* 1.449, etc.), and from it is made the sacred drink of Demeter, the κυκεών (*Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 208). It is from barley-flour (ἄλφιτα) that μᾶζα is made (*Ar. Eq.* 1166-67). Μᾶζα too is used in religious rites: the Laconian Epidaureans threw it into a pond in honour of Ino/Leucothea; good luck was portended if they sank (*Paus.* 3.23.8). Participants in the cult of Dionysus at Phigalea were called μαζῶνες (*Harmod.* 1, *IG V* 2,178). It is comparatively coarse, as is barley itself (MacDowell 1971: 231 ad *Ar. Vesp.* 718), and so a second choice food (cf. ' Ἀγαθὴ καὶ μᾶζα μετ' ἄρτον, *Zen.* 1.12), which is why Archilochus is eating it on campaign. Wheat (πυρός), by contrast, is a more modern and refined addition to the Greek diet, whose flour is called ἄλευρον; it is the bread made from it that one called ἄρτος.

Long ago, E. Assmann (1908: 199) suggested that μᾶζα is borrowed from Hebrew *matstsāh*, "unleavened bread", the food of the Passover Seder (Exodus 12.8) in which it serves to commemorate the haste with which the Israelites came out of Egypt (12.39), contrasted with *ḥamets*, "leavened bread" in daily use. Though

rejected by mainstream Classicists, this idea has been repeated as recently as Brown 2000: 302. The present article joins Assmann and Brown in advocating this view. While we have noted above the morphological difficulties in deriving it from Greek, these vanish if one postulates *matstsāh* as the source. *Ts* naturally becomes zeta in Greek. Middle mutes cannot be doubled in Greek, and loss of this “strengthening” (in the parlance of Hebrew grammar) leads to compensatory lengthening of the first alpha, as, e.g. within Greek itself, the expected third declension nominative singular *μέλαν-ς becomes μέλας once the final stem-consonant, *nu* has been dropped for reasons of euphony. The final *h* in the Hebrew word, meanwhile, was not pronounced, but was rather used to mark the final long /a/ by an orthographic convention that preceded in the history of the language the development of the Masoretic vowel-signs (Kautzsch 1910: 36 §7 b 2[a]).

Hebrew *matstsāh* in turn may derive from the verb *mātsāh*, “to drain out” (still used in Modern Hebrew). This verb appears to be parallel to Akkadian *mazû*, “to squeeze, produce a liquid” (said in making beer – Civil, et al. 1977: 439), Arabic *mazza*, “to be tasteless, neither sweet nor bitter” (said of wine), and Aramaic *m^etsāts*, “to suck and press out” (Koehler, Baumgartner and Stamm 1995: 2.621). The word *matstsāh* itself, however has no known cognates in these or other Semitic languages.

I would also note that the μᾶζα/ἄρτος distinction in Greek parallels that in Hebrew between *matstsāh* and *ḥamets*. True, the Greek opposition is between one ingredient, namely the grain used, and the Hebrew between the presence or absence of yeast. Both, however, contrast a primitive food eaten under duress and often reserved for religious observance, with a more sophisticated one suitable to everyday secular life. Moreover this objection about the relevant ingredient may be illusory, for Deuteronomy 16.3 calls *matstsāh leḥem oni*, ‘the bread of affliction’. On this basis the Karaites make [it] only from barley, which was used to make the poor man’s bread” (Rabinowitz 1972: 1158).

If μᾶζα indeed comes from Hebrew *matstsāh*, how, when and where could this have happened? We cannot say for sure, but a

(perhaps surprising) possibility suggests itself. Clearly at the time of borrowing the Hebrew word still had its original, generic sense of poor, unleavened bread, and had not yet acquired the technical reference to Passover. That is to say, it was borrowed before the Israelites' exodus from Egypt in 1491 B. C. (Joseph. *AJ* 2.15). Before that the Jews controlled Egypt's grain-supply: Joseph had advised pharaoh to stockpile grain (Gen. 48.13-26), and the Israelites worked at the store-cities of Pithom and Rameses in the delta (Exod. 1.10-12). This, of course, is the Jewish view of events; yet Egyptian records tell, from their own very different vantage-point, a similar story, since for a time in the mid-sixteenth century Egypt was ruled by the Semitic "bedouin kings" ('Υκσῶς = Egyptian *ḥk3 š3sw*, Manetho 82) from their stronghold in Avaris.

Greeks, meanwhile, purported to recall a time when they knew no grain, and lived off acorns (Pl. *Resp.* 372c). While wandering in quest of her daughter, Demeter came to Eleusis in Attica in 1408 (*Marmor Parium* 239 A 9, 12 = Jacoby 1904: 5-6). From there her missionary apostle, Triptolemus spread the gift of grain (Aristid. *Panath.* 105.11 p. 53 Dindorf). Demeter came from Egypt, where she was known as Isis (Hdt. 2.171, Clem. Al. *Protr.* pp. 12-13 Potter, cf. Diod. Sic. 1.29, 96, Lactant. *Inst. Div.* 1.21). As with Joseph's story, whatever truth this tale may have is thickly overlaid with myth – not wholly implausible myth, though, for both Linear B tablets (circa 1200) and the contemporary archaeological record prove Egypt-Greek contact during the Mycenaean age.² The most obvious place for such contact to have occurred was in Lower Egypt, precisely where the "bedouin kings" were found.

Whoever rules the grain-supply is in charge of making bread. And whoever makes a thing often gets to name it.

² The man's name *A₃-ku-pi-ti-jo* appears in KN Db 1105 + 1446. For the archaeological evidence, see Cline 1994, with bibliography.

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