

### 3.22: bread as shit

**σιτεόμενοι κόπρον:** why, when the Fisheaters report that the Persians live off wheat bread (ἄρτος), does the Ethiopian king react by commenting that they are ‘eating shit’? Legrand follows Stein’s explanation that ‘wheat grows from manured ground’; and that H. may have shared this view himself is perhaps suggested by the fact that the King’s tart observation, in H.’s text, is a comment on the spies’ description of ‘the characteristics of wheat’ (τῶν πυρῶν τὴν φύσιν). However, the Persians did not eat wheat in its natural state but in the form of loaves (as the Fisheaters said); and I wonder whether what was described in some pre-Herodotean version was not the much more interesting process of *bread-making*. If so, the joke equation ‘bread = shit’ would refer to analogous stages in producing the two substances. Wheat is first ground between millstones, human food between ‘molars’ (same metaphor in Greek); the mixing with water and kneading would correspond to mastication with saliva; baking in the oven to digestion in the stomach; and, as final product, loaves to turds. So, in this humorous perspective, to eat wheat bread rolls would be to eat shit.<sup>1</sup>

Confirmation: see Poseidonios F284EK (tr. p. 364, from Seneca, Letter 90.22f.): P. actually did argue that millstones were invented by analogy with the action of teeth, that water was added to the flour in imitation of saliva, and that the oven mimicked the heat of the stomach. All that’s missing is the final stage of excretion, the visible end-product.

So Poseidonios will be an inheritor of the full form of Herodotos’ joke.

As with the Siphnian oracle (see on 57.4), H. provides no explicit exegesis. Is it an old joke that the audience know already? [But sometimes he appears to explain glaringly obvious points – are those interpolations?] Or is he delicately avoiding vulgarity? Or – the most interesting possibility – is he skating past *because he’s not sure what the point is himself*? His mangled reproduction of the ring-compositional structure here (see remarks above) might give some support to the last explanation.

A possible alternative explanation:

What is here told of the Ethiopians could be (and no doubt was) in other contexts ascribed to the Egyptians; two passages in Book 2 concerning their diet correlate directly with this one. At

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<sup>1</sup>Lévi-Strauss’ *La potière jalouse* characterises the human body as ‘a kiln for cooking excrement’, acc. to *TLS* 31oct08.5.

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2.77.4 the fact that the Egyptians are (after the Libyans) ‘the healthiest’ of nations (just as the Ethiopians are ‘longest-lived’) is ascribed to their consumption of bread made from spelt flour, washed down with beer; this confirms earlier information (36.2) about the bread, where we were told that eaters of wheat and barley bread are regarded as ὄνειδος μέγιστον, ‘an abomination’ [cf. 1.138 αἰσχίστον: for the Persians, lying is the greatest disgrace]. Why? Once again, we are not told. That passage features H.’s only other use of the word κόπρος; the context is that Egyptians, perverse as always, knead the spelt-bread with their feet, and use their hands for handling mud and shit. From this perspective, the disgust felt for other nations would arise not so much from the material the bread is made from as the fact that the hands are used to make it; just as Muslims are instinctively repelled by the idea of eating with the left hand.

It looks then as if an Egyptian motif has been ‘extrapolated’ out to the corresponding fringe-culture, and sharpened in the process (doesn’t Fehling make this a principle?). Cf. the paintings of the dead which are kept in Ethiopian houses (§24), corresponding to the *memento mori* likenesses touted at Egyptian parties (2.78).