

A SHORT HISTORY OF BREAD

It is widely believed that the Fourth Earl of Sandwich invented the sandwich. The story goes that in order to avoid interruption to an all-night gambling session the hungry earl stuffed a hunk of meat between two slabs of bread and chowed on that while continuing his poker game. This is yet another example of the kind of misogynistic misattribution all too common in history (although it must be admitted that ‘a hunk of meat between two slabs of bread’ does indeed sound like something a male would come up with). The story of the humble loaf is full of such fanciful sandwich stories, for, humble as the loaf may be, everybody wants a slice. However, before anybody could invent the sandwich somebody had to invent bread, to say nothing of fire.

Fire was easy enough, old Ma Nature was always setting things on fire; you just had to steal some flames without getting caught up in them. Our ancestors were very hairy and this pelt was useful protection when dashing up to bush fires to light your pipe. Other animals knew *Homo sapiens* by its smell of singed fur. Consequently, as *sapiens* began its takeover of the planet, it had no predators to worry about; sabre-tooth tigers preferred to starve to extinction than eat smoked man.

It was a female of the singed species by the name of Lucy that invented bread. Some archaeologists say her name was Suzy but their case has been severely tarnished by the discovery that the celebrated cave paintings at Crotte de Chèvre (of a neolithic bread recipe and signed ‘Suzy’) were done in poster paint.

The Lucy camp point to the irrefutable evidence found recently in Cappadocia near Tiklishku: Lucy’s campfire and, not least, Lucy herself (or what was left of her). Archaeologists have pieced together her story from the evidence uncovered at the bottom of a mud-pool that had been drained for cleaning. The most extraordinary artifact they discovered was the golden boomerang that Lucy still held in her wizened hands. The runes scratched onto this marvellous object translate as follows: Great Boomerang Lucy Bread (a taciturn race short on prepositions it seems). Great Boomerangs were given only for singular inventions; just two others have been found (Cindy Tablecloth and Olaf Hatchet), although rumour has it that several of them have been recovered and instantly converted into bullion, including one inscribed, it is said, Great Boomerang Beate Dildo.

Her recognition as the Mother of all Loaves would not save Lucy from her sad fate. As she baked bread in her fire one morning a nearby volcano erupted, covering her campsite in hot ash. In those last desperate minutes Lucy clung to her golden boomerang, perhaps praying that its power would rescue her, perhaps because she didn’t want that bitch Beate to get her hands on it. In any event there it was with Lucy’s fossilised form millenia after everybody had forgotten

about the volcano and about Lucy, about her mortal remains baked like one of her own loaves in the ashes. There it was waiting to tell of Lucy's great achievement.

Poor Lucy. No sooner is her claim to fame established than along comes a fellow called Professor Theodorakis Phallos claiming that the whole thing is a hoax orchestrated by radical-feminist archaeologists at the University of Ankara. This little Greek personage has suggested that these upstanding academics are trying to fake the case that it was women who invented everything that was useful and non-lethal, leaving men good only for tools that chop and kill. Professor Phallos is a terrorist and latent rapist and his lunatic ravings need not detain us here.

Lucy's pioneering work was not in vain. Others stepped forward to harvest the wheat, grind the grain, knead the dough and gather the firewood. It has to be said that not one of these was a man. They were too busy hunting to be bothered looking for grasses, and, as much as they liked chopping things, they didn't care for wheat (have you ever tried cutting grass with a stone axe?). While the men chased down defenceless critters and bludgeoned them to death the women quietly got on with building Western civilisation.

Because, as is well known, Western civilisation is founded on the loaf. It was all very well roaming around hunting and gathering and leaving your messes behind when your campsite got too stinky, but building a civilisation required staying put and putting up with the stink. Once settled, the hunters found that they soon ran low on critters to bludgeon and meat became a luxury. This is where the loaf came in. With their usual admirable foresight the women realized that while the men were out on futile searches for something to kill that was bigger than a chipmunk they had better 'do a Lucy' and collect that grass seed.

Naturally, collecting led to storing which led to a massive building programme. Boy, were the hunters surprised when they got back with their two rabbits and couple of dozen sparrows. Where there had once been a collection of grass huts there were now little mud houses with white picket fences, as well as a park, library, school, town hall and, most civilised of all, shoe shops. The air reeked of baking and the men realized that they were famished for a square meal (you try living on sparrow kebabs for weeks at a time). After gorging themselves (cheese on toast and bread pudding) the men had a big pow-wow where they agreed that this sedentary life wasn't so bad after all, especially if the women did all the work. Bulgar the Boastful then made a proposal that was carried unanimously by the entire moot, and so it was that the first building of any consequence erected by men was a public house by the name of The Happy Hunter.

It was Glenda the Priestess, a Babylonian responsible for the feeding of temple slaves (and renowned skinflint), who invented the mini-loaf. This was officially dubbed a 'priestess' (cuneiform tablets have been found that make reference to the distribution of 'the King's priestesses' to favoured courtiers), but as this was difficult to pronounce for most Babylonians

(who tended to lisp) it was popularly known as a 'bun' after Glenda the Priestess' nickname, Bunny. The great Babylonian mystery remains however: why was Glenda called Bunny?

The religious significance of the staff of life has long been recognised. The Romans made Ceres the goddess of bread even if everybody knew it was the Emperor who handed it out at circuses. And no history of bread can be complete without mention of its significance to Christians who, time was, butchered each other in their disputations over what happens, exactly, to consecrated bread in the stomach. Not until the celebrated *bon viveur* and amateur surgeon, Comte Vérole de Con-Trempé, sliced open the gut of a criminal who had taken communion ten minutes before his hanging did the controversy abate. The Comte declared: *Zee ost iz mursh!* And anybody who cared to take a look (there weren't many) had to agree with him.

The baguette is justly *Le Pain Officiel de France*. It was created by an ancient Gaulish person after all. Her name was Panoraisanix and she was a fierce warrior princess. Always on the look out for one more thing to lob at the Romans she had hit on loaves. The battlefield results using the traditional round loaves were disappointing; once the legionnaires had recovered from their shock at being bounced with Gallic bread they laughed and made jokes about '*Pannini galli portus stopam*'. Panoraisanix didn't speak a word of Latin but she knew when somebody was taking the mick and this just made the little Gallic princess madder than ever.

It was the poncy little javelins the Romans carried that gave her the idea. Real warriors chucked spears, big ones; Panoraisanix would give the Romans crusty replicas of their wimpy weapons and stick them where it hurt. At the next bake-off with the Latins it was the Gauls that had the last laugh when they skewered nearly the entire African Expeditionary Corps (the famous 'Fighting Gerbils' who had salted Carthage) with their wicked '*bâgh eds*' (literally, 'sticker of dagos' - the Gauls were notoriously politically incorrect). On the Fourteenth of July the French Republic still celebrates this great victory, '*des nos ancêtres, les Gaulois*', when the President salutes *La Grande Fusée de l'Armée*, the biggest baguette in the world.

For the breadstick we must honour Carla Pamboli, the pampered illegitimate daughter of Scarfazzo Borgia (aka Pope Maudito the First and Last) and a kitchen wench he rodgered on his way to mass one fine Sunday morning. Carla was well educated and spoke several European languages and corresponded with many great women in history. She particularly enjoyed writing letters to Cleopatra because then she could practice her ancient Greek. Carla was, in other words, a little strange. Stranger still, for the daughter of a prince of the church, she liked to cook (her mother's influence no doubt; as to her father's influence, the less said about that the better). Carla's invention remains extremely popular with women today since it is a well-known fact that you can eat as many breadsticks as you want and you won't gain even a gramme in weight.

For centuries the epitome of luxury eating was white bread. The lower down the social scale you were the darker and grittier your bread. In eighteenth century England, while the labouring classes broke their teeth on dark brown lumps of chaff and gravel, the toffs' white toast was so airy it had to be held in the silver toast rack by a silken cord. If a piece got away it would drift up to the ceiling from where a servant with a toast brush had to coax it back to the table.

A man it was, Dr Hiram K Wye of Illinois, who turned white bread into the object of derision it is today. Wye worked for the Standard Oil Company and was interested in finding ways to broaden the market for petroleum products. His contribution to the history of bread is now to be found in supermarkets all over the world. Petrobran, Panbenzene and Paraffin Toast were all tried as names for his product but to the public Dr Wye's hydrocarbon loaves have always been known as 'plastic bread'.

In an interesting historical inversion it is now the poor that subsist on white 'bread' and suffer terrible diseases due to the lack of roughage, while the rich hoard the wholewheat to scrape their sated intestines and extend their wretched lives.

And that brings us back to earls. The Fourth Earl of Stuffed Bread was doing no more than copying a custom known to peasants as far back as Glenda's time (cuneiform tablets have been found that make reference to 'stuffed priestesses'). No doubt this *aristo* had looked out the window of his carriage one day and noticed a ploughman in the field eating his traditional lunch of a piece of cheese held between two slices of rough bread. The peasants called this a 'ploughman's' but the Fourth Earl was damned if he was going to eat something named after a peasant and so he did what came naturally (*noblesse oblige*) and named it after himself. To give credit where credit is due it was the Earl's housekeeper, Miss Emily Fudge, who thought of cutting off the crusts to make his lordship's snack less rustic in appearance. Technically, this means we should speak of a 'fudge' when we refer to the refined English varieties of stuffed bread such as egg and cress, but, as always, the credit has gone entirely to a dead white male.