The ancient Egyptian bread and fermentation

Mohamed EA
Botany Department, Faculty of Science, Suez Canal University, Ismailia 41522, Egypt.

Ancient Egyptians depended chiefly on bread in their diet and it was consumed by poor and wealthy people at all meals. Ancient Egyptian bread was variable in texture and structure as Egyptians used many cereal grains especially, wheat grains in bread production, wheat grains containing vitamins, proteins, minerals and starch and it had an important role in all sides of ancient Egyptians life.

Bread production process had many stages, first farmers gathered the grain stalks, packed them in heaps, used cattle to separate grains from husks, then kernels were treading out of husks, followed by removing straw away from grains by throwing into the air and then farmers used sieves to remove the remain chaffs from grains.

Above figure showing flat circular basketry dish of woven palm leaf with two loaves of unleavened bread. One piece of bread has hand imprints on both sides of the loaf, probably left by the baker. Found in a New Kingdom site in Thebes. ©TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Above figure showing the large figure of the king, at the left, and the smaller figure of a young woman offering bread loaves appear to be participating in two different scenes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Ancient Egyptian gathered grains stalk © Kenneth Garrett
As seen in the scenes in the tomb of Senet and similar drawings, the most depicted part of the recipe was the process of processing the grain. With a heavier husk, the process of removing it without breaking the grain was long and challenging. In emmer, the chaff does not come off through threshing, but comes in spikelets, which need to be removed by moistening and pounding with a pestle to avoid crushing the grains inside. It was then dried in the sun, winnowed and sieved, and finally milled on a saddle quern. Once that was done, the milling of the grain presented also some difficulties. Egypt’s Middle Kingdom didn’t have mills, and flour was mostly produced by hand by the women. The result was coarse flour, which had ash, pieces of husk, and even sand. It was sifted several times, but the result wasn’t optimal.

Secondly, ancient Egyptians turned obtained grains into flour by putting grains in bowls attached with pestle producing coarse flour and to make it finer, grains were put between tow heavy stones. To make bread, there are some ingredients added to form dough that baked later by fire or by slapping them on clay oven wall into bread and the most common type of bread was made only from water and flour.

The use of yeast to leaven bread by the production of carbon dioxide was developed in Egypt. The ancient Egyptians extended their bread-making technology to the production of an acidic beer called boza or boozah from a lightly baked "loaf" of germinated grain. Fermentation was a procedure of bread making as water and flour mixture was lift in a warm day for long time to be fermented because of natural yeasts that found in flour and milk that was added as a flavor.

Further readings