

Millet in the Roman Diet

“If you want to waste your time, scatter millet and pick it up again”
(*moram si quaeres, sparge miliu[m] et collige*)

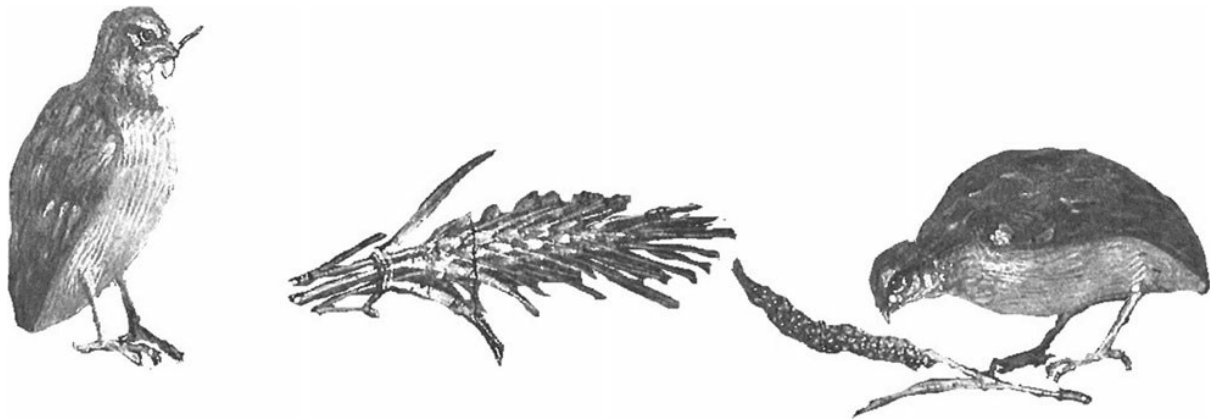
A proverb scratched on a column in the peristyle of the House of M. Holconius Rufus (VIII.4.4) at Pompeii (Jashemski et al. 2002, 137).

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Looking for the evidence of millet, a generic term for a large group of small seeded-grasses, that includes both *Setaria italica* (L.) P. Beauv. and *Panicum miliaceum* L., used during the Roman empire, circa 753 BC–610 AD, presents a number of challenges. Millets are only mentioned a handful of times in the ancient surviving texts, there are only a few well-documented preserved archaeological finds of millet and limited scientific evidence, including archaeobotanical (ancient preserved plant remains) and isotopic evidence (based upon plants using either C3 and C4 photosynthesis). All these lines of evidence are problematic in terms of their representativeness but together they offer a more complete glimpse into the growing understanding of millet and its use and importance in the Roman world.

In other plant taxa it may be problematic to attribute specific botanical species to ancient Greek and Latin names as it is difficult to trace the ancient version of the plant through to modern times. However, this is not the case with *Panicum miliaceum* or common millet as it has been recovered dating back to the end of the third millennium BC on European archaeological sites (Boivin et al. 2012; Dalby 2003, p. 99; Valamoti 2013) and *Setaria italica* (L.) P. Beauv or commonly known as Italian millet has been cultivated since the Bronze Age circa 2000 BC in Europe (Jashemski et al. 2002, p. 162). The wild progenitor or ancestor of foxtail millet, *Setaria viridis* (L.) P. Beauv, is well identified and shows clear morphological affinities with, and can interbreed with domesticated *Setaria italica* (L.) P. Beauv. (De Wet et al. 1979, p. 53; Zohary et al. 2012, p. 71).

Wall painting of common millet (left) and Italian millet (right) being eaten by two quails (NMinv. No. 8750) from Pompeii, Italy (photo by S. Jashemski p. 137 in *Natural History of Pompeii*). NB: It is possible to distinguish the two plant species and their similarity to modern species of common millet and Italian millet



*Fig 1: Wall painting of common millet (left) and Italian millet (right) being eaten by two quails (NMinv. No. 8750) from Pompeii, Italy (photo by S. Jashemski p. 137 in *Natural History of Pompeii*). NB: It is possible to distinguish the two plant species and their similarity to modern species of common millet and Italian millet*

Millet is most commonly known in ancient times as being used for fodder to feed livestock and other domesticated animals including birds (see Figure 1). However, millet was also eaten by humans. Millet can be boiled and made into a porridge or ground into a flour and made into a heavy flat bread. The Romans probably did both with it. From the writing of the ancient Greek physician and author Philotimus, we know that one way of preparing millet involved being ‘pounded when raw, ground finely and, after some water has been poured on, it is pounded once again, strained, boiled’ (Oribasius I.15.2).

Based upon the ancient texts it appears that millet was not the Romans’ favourite or first choice of flour for making bread with but it also wasn’t discarded by the Romans. For example, the presence of millet within the majority of properties with Insula VI.I and other elite houses within the city of Pompeii suggests that millet may have been consumed by the wealthy Roman owners and their servants and slaves. We now know that millets are rich in carbohydrates but poorer in digestible proteins than other cereals making it an excellent appetite satisfier to fend off hunger (Spurr 1986). Thus, common and Italian millet could have been used by the Romans in place of other cereal grains to make and/or bulk up breads and porridges, particularly in times of food shortages or crop failures in an attempt to satisfy a starving stomach. Practically, millet filled a very useful place in the Roman diet. Millet was cheap to purchase and easy to grow alongside both summer and winter

crops. Millet could have helped to hedge against famine in terms of its ability to grow in a wide range of less than ideal agricultural environments. This would have been a very important trait in an unpredictable agrarian world that was quickly exhausting its agricultural farmland (Fraser and Rimas 2010). As the ancient author Strabo (5.1.12) advised, 'millet is the greatest preventive of famine, since it withstands every unfavourable weather, and can never fail, even though there be scarcity of every other grain'.

Traditional Roman foods were considered ones that the small farmer could grow cheaply on their small plots of land to sustain their families which included millets, pulses and vegetables. Millets were grown in Europe since the Bronze Age and possessed a hardy nature, capable of growing when and where other crops failed. These intrinsic attributes of common and Italian millet's nature tie-in with traditional Roman values, connecting Romans with their perceived past as a conservative, hardy agrarian people living off the land. Based upon limited ritual evidence, common and Italian millet were likely traditional Roman foods that continued to be offered to the gods. Hence, common and Italian millet appear to fit into the model of the conflicted Roman psyche of traditional agrarian values and the reality of expanding new frontiers and increasing influx of foreign foods and ideas within the empire.

Thus, the evidence for millet reveals that millet was part of the Roman dietary assemblage, to varying degrees, throughout the Roman empire. Based upon the limited evidence to date it looks like millet consumption within Roman society was a more complex issue than the ancient sources alone would lead one to believe and millet consumption was closely tied to Roman social, economic and cultural values (Killgrove and Tykot 2013, p. 36). As more data is collected it is suspected that millets' reputation and usefulness in the ancient world will become clearer and millets will move beyond being regarded simply as animal fodder.

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