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Butter in Dietetics, Pharmacology, Therapeutic Procedures and Culinary Art: Galen and his Followers



1. Galen and later medical authors on butter in dietetics, pharmacology and therapeutics

Galen never devoted much of his attention to describing butter (*boútyron*) as a foodstuff¹. Neither had he a lot to say on the subject in his main dietetic work, namely in *De alimentorum facultatibus*. From

¹ Butter in the Greco-Roman antiquity, cf. J. André, *L'alimentation et la cuisine à Rome*, Paris 1961, p. 158–159; A. Dalby, *Siren Feasts. A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece*, London–New York 1996, p. 65–66, 89; M. Toussaint-Samat, *Histoire naturelle et morale de la nourriture*, Paris 1997, p. 157; J.P. Alcock, *Milk and its Products in Ancient Rome*, [in:] *Milk. Beyond the Dairy. Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1999*, ed. H. Walker, Totnes 2000, p. 33; C.A. Déry, *Milk and Dairy Products in the Roman Period*, [in:] *Milk...*, p. 121; R.I. Curtis, *Ancient Food Technology*, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2001, p. 399–400; A. Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*, London–New York 2003, p. 65; J.P. Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World*, Westport–London 2006, p. 83, 154; D.L. Thurmond, *A Handbook of Food Processing in Classical Rome. For her Bounty no Winter*, Leiden–Boston 2006, p. 191–192; W. Cavannah, *Food Preservation in Greece during the Late and Final Neolithic Periods*, [in:] *Cooking Up the Past: Food and Culinary Practices in the Neolithic and Bronze Age Aegean*, eds. C. Mele, J. Renard, Oxford 2007, p. 115; J.M. Wilkins, S. Hill, *Food in the Ancient World*, Malden, Mass.–Oxford 2006, p. 162; L. Civitello, *Cuisine and Culture. A History of Food and People*, Hoboken 2008, p. 45.

this treatise we can learn that butter was made from milk fat, the greatest amount of which could be found in cow milk². Galen compared its properties to olive oil, as he classified both as fats, and explained that the similarity between the two could be observed when butter was spread on the surface of the body or over a tanned animal pelt³. He also indicated that, for this reason, butter (rather than olive oil) was used as a body care product by the inhabitants of some cooler regions of the Empire (i.e., in the areas, where olive groves were not a common sight)⁴. Galen also stated that the properties of the discussed substance were analogical to the qualities typical of animal fats (both in their liquid [*pimelé*] and solid [*stéar*] state⁵), and admitted to frequently using butter in his own medical practice⁶.

More details regarding the qualities and application of butter can, unsurprisingly, be found in *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*⁷. The physician begins his disquisition by restating that it is made from the fat element of milk⁸, and then moves on to dispute the opinion of Dioscorides, who claims that the foodstuff is obtained from the milk of sheep and goats⁹. According to Galen, it is produced from cow milk, as indicated even by the etymology of the word *boútyron*, which derives from the noun *boús*, which denotes 'cow'¹⁰. Short as it may seem,

² It is the only part of the passage that speaks of butter as a food.

³ In the fragment he addressed the pharmacological characteristics of butter, explaining the fact that both olive oil and butter were emollients, equally able to smoothen the surface of both living skin and processed leather.

⁴ Cf. P l i n y, XI, 239, 3–8.

⁵ He explained that, just like a liquid fat (*pimelé*), butter, when cast into a fire, causes it to flame up, and also, just like a solid fat (*stéar*), it could be admixed to poultices.

⁶ G a l e n, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, 683, 11 – 684, 6, vol. VI.

⁷ G a l e n, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 272, 9 – 273, 18, vol. XII.

⁸ G a l e n, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 272, 9 – 272, 12, vol. XII.

⁹ D i o s c o r i d e s, II, 72, 1, 2–3.

¹⁰ G a l e n, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 272, 12–15, vol. XII. Cf. P l i n y, XXVIII, 133, 2–3.

Galen's discussion with Dioscorides, in fact, points out to a pattern of husbandry in the Mediterranean, revealing differences in the breeding model in terms of location¹¹.

Further in his text, the physician focuses on the pharmacological characteristics of butter, indicating that it facilitated the concoction of harmful juices (in the parts of the body it was applied to) and, to a lesser extent, showed some diaphoretic effect (within the area it was rubbed into). Thus, i.e. because of its limited diaphoretic action, it should be applied only to tissues which were neither excessively soft nor hard¹². As butter was not capable of healing hard tumours on the body, it was primarily applied in the treatment of inflammation of the parotids, swollen glands, and ailments occurring in the mouth, especially in children and women (i.e., in people of a delicate tissue constitution)¹³. Accordingly, butter could be used as an effective agent to alleviate gum irritation caused by teething¹⁴. The list of butter-based medicaments also includes cataplasms recommended to people suffering from pains in the sides of the thorax, and Galen explains the action by saying that, when administered orally, butter effectively removed phlegm from the lower respiratory tract; thereby its effectiveness was in cures prescribed for patients with pneumonia and inflammation of the pleura. In such cases, the afflicted person was to be served butter in a form that allowed them to lick it off in small portions. Galen is very detailed about the method. He explains that when taken in this way and with no additives, butter could effectively contribute to dispersing noxious humours (and, to a lesser degree, contributed to their expectoration). Meanwhile, butter

¹¹ Cf. the chapter in the present book on Dioscorides' discussion on butter.

¹² Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 272, 15–17, vol. XII.

¹³ Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 273, 1–7, vol. XII. On the subject, cf. Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 266, 2–6, vol. XII. On the application of butter in treating children, cf. Pliny, XI, 239, 7–8.

¹⁴ Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 273, 7–11, vol. XII.

enriched with honey or bitter almonds facilitated the excretion of the secretion lingering within the thorax (but to a lesser extent stimulated the concoction of harmful juices)¹⁵.

A recourse to later medical texts shows that Galen's teachings were not subject to modification. That is why analogical content regarding the properties of butter can also be found in the works of Oribasius¹⁶, who

¹⁵ Galen, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, 273, 11–18, vol. XII.

¹⁶ Butter as a substance facilitating the digestion of harmful humours – Oribasius, *Collectiones medicae*, XIV, 36, 1, 1–5 (butter – XIV, 36, 1, 4); Oribasius, *Synopsis*, II, 25, 1, 1–3 (butter – II, 25, 1, 3); Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, II, 11, 1, 1–4 (butter – II, 11, 1, 3); butter as a substance facilitating the removal of purulence – Oribasius, *Synopsis*, II, 26, 1, 1–3 (butter – II, 26, 1, 3); Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, II, 12, 1, 1–16 (butter – II, 12, 1, 13); butter as a softening substance – Oribasius, *Collectiones medicae*, XIV, 38, 1, 1–14, 6 (butter – XIV, 38, 14, 5); Oribasius, *Synopsis*, II, 27, 1, 1–6 (butter – II, 27, 1, 6); Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, II, 13, 1, 1–23 (butter – II, 13, 1, 23); butter as a substance facilitating the clearing of the lower respiratory tract – Oribasius, *Synopsis*, II, 39, 1, 1–3, 8 (butter – II, 39, 1, 1); Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, II, 17, 1, 1–2, 2 (butter – II, 17, 1, 2); butter as a diaphoretic substance – Oribasius, *Collectiones medicae*, XIV, 60, 1, 1–2, 49 (butter – XIV, 60, 2, 42); Oribasius, *Synopsis*, II, 50, 1, 1–18 (butter – II, 50, 1, 16); Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, II, 23, 1, 1–32 (butter – II, 23, 1, 6). Pharmacological characteristics of butter – Oribasius, *Collectiones medicae*, XV, 2, 8, 1–5; Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, II, 1, b, 12, 1–13, 4. Butter in late antiquity and the Byzantine period – S. D a r, *Food and Archaeology in Romano-Byzantine Palestine*, [in:] *Food in Antiquity*, eds. J. W i l k i n s, D. H a r v e y, M. D o b s o n, Exeter 1999, p. 333; I. A n a g n o s t a k i s, *Trofíkes delētēriaseis sto Byzantio. Diatrofíkes antilēpseis kai symperifores (60s–110s ai.)*, [in:] *Byzantinōn diatrofē kai mageireiai. Praktika ēmeridas “Peri tes diatrofēs sto Byzantio”. Thessalonikē Mouseio Byzantinou Politismou 4 Noembriou 2001. Food and Cooking in Byzantium. Proceedings of the Symposium “On Food in Byzantium”. Thessaloniki Museum of Byzantine Culture 4 November 2001*, ed. D. P a p a n i k o l a - B a k i r t z i, Athena 2005, p. 89; A. A. D e m o s t h e n o u s, *The Scholar and the Partridge: Attitudes Relating to Nutritional Goods in the Twelfth Century from the Letters of the Scholar John Tzetzes*, [in:] *Feast, Fast or Famine. Food and Drink in Byzantium*, eds. W. M a y e r, S. T r z c i o n k a, Brisbane 2005, p. 30; E. K i s l i n g e r, *Trögontas kai pinontas ektos spitiou*, [in:] *Byzantinōn diatrofē...*, p. 56; A. N. J. L o u v a r i s, *Fast and Abstinence in Byzantium*, [in:] *Feast...*, p. 197; Ch. B o u r b o u, M. P. R i c h a r d s, *The Middle Byzantine Menu: Palaeodietary Information from Isotopic Analysis of Humans and Fauna from Kastella, Crete*, IJOa 17, 2007, p. 65; M. G r ü n b a r t, *Store in a Cool and Dry Place: Perishable Goods and their Preservation in Byzantium*, [in:] *Eat, Drink and Be Merry (Luke 12:19). Food and Wine in Byzantium. In Honour of Professor A.A.M. Bryer*,

additionally refers to Dioscorides' passage on the production of medicinal soot obtained from the product¹⁷. This last issue, in turn, is entirely ignored by Aëtius of Amida¹⁸ and Paul of Aegina¹⁹, who only quote a few extracts from Galen's works. The short description of the properties

eds. L. Brubaker, K. Linardou, Aldershot 2007, p. 48; J. Koder, *Stew and Salted Meat – Opulent Normality in the Diet of Every Day?*, [in:] *Eat, Drink and Be Merry...*, p. 64; A. Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium. The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire*, London–New York 2010, p. 55, 72; Ch. Bourbou, *Fasting or Feasting? Consumption of Meat, Dairy Products and Fish in Byzantine Greece. Evidence from Chemical Analysis*, [in:] *Zōa kai periballon sto Byzantio (70s–120s ai.)*, eds. I. Anagnostakis, T.G. Kolias, E. Papadopoulou, Athena 2011, p. 101; M. Kokoszko, *Rola nabiału w diecie późnego antyku i wczesnego Bizancjum (IV–VII w.)*, *ZW* 16, 2011, p. 21–22; idem, *Smaki Konstantynopola*, [in:] *Konstantynopol – Nowy Rzym. Miasto i ludzie w okresie wczesnobizantyńskim*, eds. M.J. Leszka, T. Wolnińska, Warszawa 2011, p. 489; I. Anagnostakis, *Byzantine Diet and Cuisine. In between Ancient and Modern Gastronomy*, [in:] *Flavours and Delights. Tastes and Pleasures of Ancient and Byzantine Cuisine*, ed. I. Anagnostakis, Athens 2013, p. 53; M. Leontsinis, *Hens, Cockerels and Other Choice Fowl. Everyday Food and Gastronomic Pretensions in Byzantium*, [in:] *Flavours and Delights...*, p. 119, 129; eadem, *Butter and Lard Instead of Olive Oil? Fatty Byzantine Meals*, [in:] *Identità euromediterranea e paesaggi culturali del vino e dell'olio. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studio promosso dall'IBAM–CNR nell'ambito del Progetto MenSALe Potenza, 8–10 Novembre 2013*, ed. A. Pellettieri, Foggia 2014, p. 226; Ch. Bourbou, S. Garvie-Lok, *Bread, Oil, Wine and Milk: Feeding Infants and Adults in Byzantine Greece*, [in:] *Archaeodiet in the Greek World. Dietary Reconstruction from Stable Isotope Analysis*, eds. A. Papathanasiou, M.P. Richards, S.C. Fox, Princeton 2015, p. 174; Z. Rzeźnicka, *Milk and Dairy Products in Ancient Dietetics and Cuisine According to Galen's De alimentorum facultatibus and Selected Early Byzantine Medical Treatises*, [in:] *Latte e latticini. Aspetti della produzione e del consumo nella società mediterranea dell'Antichità e del Medioevo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studio promosso dall'IBAM – CNR e dall'IRS – FNER nell'ambito del Progetto MenSALe Atene, 2–3 Ottobre 2015*, eds. I. Anagnostakis, A. Pellettieri, Lagonegro 2016, p. 52, 62–63.

¹⁷ Oribasius, *Collectiones medicae*, XI, beta, 14, 1–9. Analogical data, cf. Dioscorides, II, 72, 1, 1–4 (butter); II, 72, 3, 1–7 (soot).

¹⁸ Aëtius of Amida, II, 221, 1–4 (butter – II, 221, 4) – butter as a substance facilitating the digestion of harmful humours; II, 222, 1–3 (butter – II, 222, 3) – butter as a substance facilitating the removal of purulence; II, 223, 1–8 (butter – II, 223, 8) – butter as a softening substance; II, 235, 1–17 (butter – II, 235, 15) – butter as a diaphoretic substance. Pharmacological characteristics of butter – Aëtius of Amida, II, 104, 1–13.

¹⁹ Paul of Aegina, VII, 3, 2, 63–66.

of butter is, however, compensated for by numerous passages containing cases of its therapeutic application²⁰. Owing to the high number of such recommendations, I am unable to refer to them all, but, instead, I would like to offer a few examples that focus exclusively on the treatment of delicate parts of the body as well as on conditions of the respiratory system. Limited as they are, they still suffice to prove the fact that butter was a common *fármakon* during the early Byzantine period.

As for the first application, we can learn from Oribasius' writings that men suffering from pains in the scrotum and genital area were advised, *inter alia*, to apply an ointment made from butter and resin (melted in equal proportions)²¹. Moreover, the same medicament, ground together with cumin, was similarly used in the treatment of

²⁰ Butter in ancient and Byzantine therapeutics and cosmetics – A. Davids on, *Butter*, [in:] *The Oxford Companion to Food*, ed. A. Davids on, Oxford–New York 1999, p. 117; H. King, *Food and Blood in Hippocratic Gynaecology*, [in:] *Food...*, p. 355–356; C.A. Déry, *Milk...*, p. 123–124; H.E.M. Coul, *Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain*, Cambridge 2006, p. 94; D.L. Thurmond, *A Handbook...*, p. 191; J.M. Wilkins, S. Hill, *Food...*, p. 162; M. Chronē, *Therapeies astheneiōn me zōikēs proleuseōs yles sta byzantina iatrika keimena. Symbolē stēn meletē tōn antilēpseōn gia tis astheneies kai tis therapeies tous sto Byzantio*, BSym 20, 2010, p. 153, 160–161, 164; eadem, *Ē panida stēn diatrofē kai stēn iatrikē sto Byzantio*, Athenai 2012, p. 209–217; F. McCormick, *Cows, Milk and Religion: The Use of Dairy Produce in Early Societies*, AZoo 47.2, 2012, p. 106; M. Kokoszko, *Galaktologia terapeutyczna (γαλακτολογία ιατρική) Galena zawarta w De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, PNH 14.2, 2015, p. 15–17, 21–22; idem, *Galen's Therapeutic Galactology (γαλακτολογία ιατρική) in De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*, [in:] *Latte e latticini...*, p. 42–43, 46–47; Z. Reżnicka, *Mleko i przetwory mleczne w medycynie wczesnego Bizancjum na przykładzie pism Orybazjusza*, [in:] *Leki i choroby odzwierzęce*, eds. L. Wdowiak, B. Płonka-Syroka, A. Syroka, vol. I, Wrocław 2016, p. 58–60.

²¹ Oribasius, *Synopsis*, IX, 35, 1, 1–6, 4 (quoted formula – IX, 35, 1, 1–2; butter – IX, 35, 1, 1); Oribasius, *Libri ad Eunapium*, IV, 102, 1, 1–6, 4 (formula – IV, 102, 1, 1–2; butter – IV, 102, 1, 1). An analogical formula is provided by Paul of Aegina, in the chapter devoted to agents which subdue the influx of sharp juices and facilitate the healing of wounds, cf. Paul of Aegina, III, 59, 2, 1–3, 15 (formula – III, 59, 3, 1–2; butter – III, 59, 3, 1). Butter was also used in the preparation of a variant of the *kerotē* ointment, administered for inflammatory conditions (accompanied by fever) of the scrotum and anus, cf. Aëtius of Amida, V, 132, 1–20 (analysed extract – V, 132, 14–15; butter – V, 132, 14).

orchitis²², while chapped skin on the foreskin and glans, as well as any ulcerations within the area, were treated with an ointment made from burned and then slaked Phrygian stone²³. As revealed in the passage, the stone was burned and slaked three times in all: first, it was mixed with butter (or rose oil), then with wine, and finally with honey. Later, the pharmaceutical was combined with rose petals and the husk of a pomegranate²⁴. The formula must have been considered effective as it is also quoted in the 7th c. by Paul of Aegina²⁵. Butter was also commonly utilised in the preparation of miscellaneous gynaecological medicaments. Owing to its properties, it is listed as an ingredient of so-called emollient suppositories (as mentioned by Oribasius, who quotes the findings made by Antyllus [2nd c. AD]²⁶). The physician classifies them among intrauterine preparations²⁷, administered for inflammations and irritations of the uterus, ailments induced by hypothermia of the uterine appendages, and flatulence caused by a disorder within the uterus. As ingredients of the medicaments, in addition to unsalted butter²⁸, Oribasius mentions Tyrrhenian wax, alkanet and lilac oils, goose and chicken fat, burned resin, deer bone marrow and fenugreek²⁹. Furthermore, butter

²² O r i b a s i u s, *Synopsis*, IX, 36, 1, 1–3, 3 (a butter-based ointment – IX, 36, 1, 3–2, 1); O r i b a s i u s, *Libri ad Eunapium*, IV, 103, 1, 1–3, 3 (a butter-based ointment – IV, 103, 1, 3–2, 1).

²³ On Phrygian stone, cf. O r i b a s i u s, *Collectiones medicae*, XIII, lambda, 2, 1–7.

²⁴ O r i b a s i u s, *Eclogae medicamentorum*, 83, 1, 1–9, 2 (quoted formula – 83, 2, 1–3, 1; butter – 83, 2, 3).

²⁵ P a u l o f A e g i n a, VII, 12, 32, 1–4 (butter – VII, 12, 32, 3).

²⁶ About the physician, cf. A.M. I e r a c i B i o, *Antyllos*, [in:] *Antike Medizin. Ein Lexikon*, ed. K.-H. L e v e n, München 2005, cols. 62–63; V. N u t t o n, *Antyllus*, [in:] *BNP*, vol. I, Leiden–Boston 2002, cols. 810–811.

²⁷ Within the same group, the physician also classifies suppositories as having a styptic and opening effect.

²⁸ One probably had to use fresh butter, since any addition of salt could lead to irritation of the organ.

²⁹ O r i b a s i u s, *Collectiones medicae*, X, 25, 1, 1–4, 5 (quoted extract – X, 25, 1, 1–2, 5; butter – X, 25, 2, 4). From the account of Paul of Aegina, we can conclude that some of the aforementioned ingredients could equally well be combined into one compound medication, since the author recommends a medicament compiled from Pontic wax, the oils of spikenard and iris, wine must, lawsonia oil, bear and goose fat, butter, hyssop, deer bone marrow, and terebinth resin, cf. P a u l o f A e g i n a, III, 68, 2, 1–14 (analysed

was also used to produce *enneafármakos pessós*, i.e., a vaginal suppository consisting of nine ingredients, which – as reported by Oribasius – was administered for amenorrhoea caused by hardenings or ulcerations within the uterus. According to the preserved formula, this medicament was made by melting equal amounts of wax, deer bone marrow, goose and ox fat, butter, terebinth resin, honey, and rose and castor oils³⁰. Paul of Aegina's output, in turn, testifies to the fact that much simpler vaginal suppositories (made from butter with the addition of hyssop) were still prescribed by doctors towards the end of the early Byzantine period³¹. The Byzantine experts in *ars medica* also used butter to cure miscellaneous diseases of the respiratory system. In such cases, Aëtius of Amida recommends, for instance, an internal application of a medicament made from butter mixed with honey³². This type of mixture was still made use of in the 7th c. AD, as Paul of Aegina teaches us that it should be administered as an *élleigma*³³. A somewhat more complex prescription included honey, fresh butter, cumin, and flaxseed. As explained, butter and other ingredients were first added to the honey (with its impurities skimmed off), and then the mixture was boiled³⁴. Yet another version of the medicament consisted of hyssop, *kómmi* resin, pennyroyal,

extract – III, 68, 2, 2–4; butter – III, 68, 2, 3). Moreover, as we learn from Oribasius, butter could also be a component of softening medicines recommended for inflammations of the uterus (the author does not specify the form in which it was administered to patients). Among the aforementioned medicaments, he lists a medicament made from fresh butter (used instead of pork fat) and fenugreek juice, and a medication compiled from butter mixed with hyssop and *melikraton*, cf. O r i b a s i u s, *Libri ad Eunapium*, IV, 112, 1, 1–14, 1 (medicine made from fenugreek juice and butter – IV, 112, 3, 3; medicament from hyssop, butter and *melikraton* – IV, 112, 3, 4–5).

³⁰ O r i b a s i u s, *Synopsis*, III, 2, 1, 1–3, 1 (butter – III, 2, 1, 2); O r i b a s i u s, *Eclogae medicamentorum*, 146, 1, 1–17, 3 (formula – 146, 17, 1–3; butter – 146, 17, 3). An analogical formula, cf. A ë t i u s o f A m i d a, XV, 27, 1–5 (butter – XV, 27, 4); P a u l o f A e g i n a, VII, 24, 6, 1–3 (butter – VII, 24, 6, 3).

³¹ P a u l o f A e g i n a, III, 64, 1, 1–3, 16 (butter with hyssop – III, 64, 2, 17).

³² A ë t i u s o f A m i d a, III, 143, 1, 1–16 (butter – III, 143, 12).

³³ P a u l o f A e g i n a, III, 28, 4, 1–13, 4 (butter – III, 28, 6, 1).

³⁴ O r i b a s i u s, *Eclogae medicamentorum*, 28, 1, 1–5, 4 (analysed formula – 28, 3, 1–4, 1; butter – 28, 3, 1; 28, 4, 1); A ë t i u s o f A m i d a, VIII, 58, 1–109 (analysed formula – VIII, 58, 74–77; butter – VIII, 58, 75–76).

ajowan (*Carum copticum* L.), pepper, husked yellow vetch, iris, spikenard, terebinth resin, fresh butter and honey. Here, the melted butter, resin and honey were blended prior to the addition of the remaining ingredients³⁵. Moreover, butter was regarded as effective in the treatment of more serious diseases – such as consumption, in which case it was taken, both orally and externally (i.e., as an ointment)³⁶. Such information is provided by, for example, Aëtius of Amida, who refers to Galen's teachings, and reports that an inflammatory condition of the lungs – manifested by sudden pain – should be treated with *keroté* made from butter and laurel or alkanet oils. In order to cleanse the lungs, he also recommends a compress made up of equal amounts of terebinth resin, wax, alkanet, butter, deer bone marrow, ox fat, and crumbled iris and hyssop³⁷. Last but not least, for problems with expectoration, the physician recommends consuming a spoonful of fresh butter on an empty stomach³⁸.

2. Butter in cuisine

I should start with a remark that medical sources never characterise butter in terms of dietetics and are very parsimonious with information on its culinary use. That said, medical doctors are happy to list its therapeutic actions and mention a cornucopia of procedures which involved its application. As a result, we may conclude that butter was more frequently perceived as a pharmaceutical agent than a foodstuff.

It should also be added that such an approach is perfectly understandable in view of the easy access to olive oil in the region. Accordingly, one can surmise that butter played a marginal role in the gastronomy of the region, which is additionally corroborated by the lack

³⁵ Aëtius of Amida, VIII, 58, 1–109 (quoted formula – VIII, 58, 83–88; butter – VIII, 58, 86–87). An analogical formula, cf. Aëtius of Amida, VIII, 58, 94–97 (butter – VIII, 58, 96).

³⁶ For instance, cf. Orbasius, *Synopsis*, IX, 4, 1, 1–12, 2 (butter – IX, 4, 8, 1–2).

³⁷ Aëtius of Amida, VIII, 75, 1–145 (quoted extract – VIII, 75, 29–34; butter – VIII, 75, 30).

³⁸ Aëtius of Amida, VIII, 75, 56–59 (butter – VIII, 75, 56–58).

of information on its production and consumption in both agronomical sources and the recipe collection attributed to Apicius. On the other hand, Pliny acknowledges that Greco-Roman culture was characterised by a general awareness of the fact that butter was eaten regularly by barbarian peoples³⁹. As a result, one can venture the hypothesis that the consumption of butter in classical antiquity was an indicator of foreignness and could imply a lack of refined culture.

As for data which could be classified as culinary, the most comprehensive amount of information on butter included in one literary work is provided neither by a medical nor a culinary author but by Pliny. He starts with a comment which corroborates the teachings of the Greek medical doctors which I have already cited – notably, that butter was produced primarily from cow milk. The author indicates, however, that the milk of sheep and goats could also be used for the purpose⁴⁰. What is especially informative is the fact that in *Historia naturalis* we can read about the production technology of butter (which supplements

³⁹ Cf. Pliny, XXVIII, 133, 1–2. A similar image of butter consumers is present in the *Deipnosophistae* by Athenaeus of Naucratis. In the work, butter is listed as a foodstuff of the barbarians known as Thracians, cf. Athenaeus of Naucratis, IV, 7 b (7, 8). On the subject, cf. K. Bartol, J. Danielewicz, *Komedia grecka od Epicharma do Menandra. Wybór fragmentów*, Warszawa 2011, p. 295. This mention in the *Deipnosophistae* well corresponds with Galen's remark that butter was typical of the cold (i.e. northern) parts of the inhabited world – Galen, *De alimentorum facultatibus*, 684, 2–3, vol. VI. The foodstuff was, however, also typical of those living in the south, as according to Strabo (1st c. BC/ 1st c. AD), butter was a substitute for olive oil for the Nabataeans, who dwelled in the Roman province of Arabia (cf. Strabo, XVI, 4, 24), and for the peoples living in the territories of ancient Ethiopia (cf. Strabo, XVII, 2, 2). On butter as barbarian peoples' foodstuff, cf. P. Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge 1999, p. 67; J.P. Alcock, *Milk...*, p. 33; C.A. Déry, *Milk...*, p. 121; A. Dalby, *Tastes of Byzantium...*, p. 72; J.P. Alcock, *Food...*, p. 159, 167, 178, 235; J.M. Wilkins, S. Hill, *Food...*, p. 24; F. McCormick, *Cows...*, p. 106; D. Brand, *Food among Greeks of the Black Sea: the Challenging Diet of Olbia*, [in:] *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World*, eds. J. Wilkins, R. Nadeau, Malden, Mass.–Oxford–Chichester 2015, p. 303; C. Cerchiai Manodori Sagredo, *Fiori per prima l'età dell'oro... fiumi di latte scorrevano (Ov. Met., I, 89;111)*, [in:] *Latte e latticini...*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ Pliny, XXVIII, 133, 3–4.

Dioscorides' scant evidence⁴¹). Pliny maintains that the process consisted of two stages. The first phase involved shaking a sealed vessel with milk, which made the fat gather on the surface of the liquid⁴². Once the first portion of butter was collected, the remaining buttermilk was coagulated⁴³; then the milk curd was filtered and, ultimately, salted. The thus obtained product was called *oxygala*. Subsequently, the remaining whey was heated in another vessel, and the second portion of fat (which had accumulated on its surface) was collected again. The author adds that butter characterised by an intense aroma was the most valued⁴⁴, which may mean that it was not used fresh but stored for a time long enough for butyric acid to form⁴⁵.

The analysis of medical treatises confirms, at least partially, the data recorded by Pliny, and provides some additional information in the field of culinary art. Accordingly, from Dioscorides, we learn that butter was made by churning milk in a vessel⁴⁶. What is more, in the descriptions of various therapeutic procedures, physicians recommended applying butter without the addition of salt, which, in all probability, means that salt was frequently used to preserve the product⁴⁷. Anthimus, however, accounts that the salted kind was harmful to health, and thus not suitable for patients suffering from consumption, to whom he recommended exclusively an oral intake of unsalted, i.e., fresh, (mixed with honey) butter⁴⁸.



⁴¹ Cf. the chapter in the book on Dioscorides' milk theory.

⁴² From the analysed extract, we can also learn that the method of preparing this product depended on the season (i.e., on the outdoor air temperature). From the author's account, we may presume that in winter, milk was heated prior to churning.

⁴³ The author explains that a small amount of water was added to milk to sour it.

⁴⁴ P l i n y, XXVIII, 133, 4 – 134, 4.

⁴⁵ Cf. a different interpretation of Pliny's evidence – C. C e r c h i a i M a n o d o r i S a g r e d o, *Fiori...*, p. 31.

⁴⁶ D i o s c o r i d e s, II, 72, 1, 3–4. Cf. O r i b a s i u s, *Collectiones medicae*, XI, beta, 14, 1–3.

⁴⁷ Cf. O r i b a s i u s, *Collectiones medicae*, X, 25, 2, 4.

⁴⁸ A n t h i m u s, 77. Just like with other medicaments of that type, this medication was supposed to be licked off gradually and in small portions. Butter on the Constantinopolitan market, cf. *Liber praefecti*, 13, 1.