

Hen and Rooster in the Mediterranean *Longue Durée*, or
How Jews Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Chicken

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Abstract

Gallus gallus, or the chicken, was domesticated in Southeast Asia and China in the sixth millennium BCE, but was introduced into the ancient Near East and Mediterranean only in the fifteenth century BCE. For more than a millennium afterwards, the use of chicken was mostly limited to cockfighting, divination, and sacrifice. Then, in the late fourth and third centuries BCE bone assemblages dramatically reveal the systematic exploitation of chicken for food at Maresha in the Judean foothills. In the Hellenistic Era eating chicken became common in the southern Levant and spread from there. And, although the chicken was introduced into Europe in the eighth century BCE, it was not used alimentarily in the Roman Empire until a century after the chicken eating at Maresha.

This inflection point in food history is bound up with a cultural contest in Judaism, over whether or not chicken is food. Chickens are not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, while utmost importance is given to the types of birds permitted for sacrifice at the Jerusalem Temple (and by analogy, for eating). Although the archaeology indicates that chickens were known in Iron Age Palestine and Jerusalem, and in spite of the chicken-relishing denizens of Hellenistic Maresha, there are threads of Jewish tradition that proscribe chicken as food or sacrifice. Interwoven with the indeterminacy of the Hebrew Bible these threads have a fascinating late antique and medieval afterlife in exegetical disputes over banned birds. These threads—found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, and rabbinic and sectarian literature—narrate part of the culinary prehistory of a people who later will be stereotypically associated with chicken fare. They also must be recognized as vestiges of an ancient multi-millennium zoological dispersal trajectory.