

A fifteenth century baker's price-list: MS. Douce Charters a 1, no. 62

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As may be inferred from the title of my paper, I shall be talking not so much about “food in the literary imagination” as about actual bread - food by definition - in an eminently practical document, a fifteenth century baker's price-list. The origin of Bodleian Library, MS. Douce Charters a 1, no. 62 is to be found in a legal instrument known as the *Assisa Panis* (Record Commission 199). During the course of the thirteenth century two legal enactments were made by the Plantagenet kings of England which were to have a direct or indirect bearing on the price of bread for centuries to come. In Article 35 of the first edition of *Magna Carta*, which as we know dates from 1215, King John imposed “per totum regnum nostrum” the adoption of a single measure of capacity for grain, the *quarterium londoniense*. This measure, also known as the Winchester measure, is still in use in the United States of America, though it was replaced in England by the Imperial measure in 1824. In around 1256 (Hill 204), during the reign of Henry III, the legal instrument known as the *Assisa panis* established a relationship between the cost of wheat and the price of bread to be observed throughout the land. The *Assisa panis* was not formally abolished nation-wide until 1836 (Webb 218, Ross 336-7), though it had long fallen into disuse, and its memory is enshrined to this day in the word “size”.

Just how informal an instrument the *Assisa panis* was emerges, not only from the fact that it is undated, but from the fact that, of all the many exemplars that have come down to us, be they written in Anglo-Norman, Latin, or Middle English, I have yet to see two which coincide *verbatim* the one with the other. *Magna Carta* on the other hand - as the name tells

us - is a charter. Neither *Magna Carta* nor the *Assisa panis*, therefore, would today qualify as a statute (Plucknett, *Legislation* 11, Baker xxii-xxii). Yet both documents appear in a medieval collection of legal enactments known as *Statuta angliae*, one of the most popular secular books of medieval England (Skemer 24). We might go so far as to say that in England throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth century the definition of a *statutum* coincided with its literal meaning: it was “something established,” what’s more, frequently established *ad hoc*, with greater or lesser solemnity, it is true, in response to a variety of problems more often than not of a practical or technical nature (Plucknett, *Statutes* 8-12).

I should like briefly to consider the language in which the *Assisa* is written. By the turn of the thirteenth century the English *statuta* might be found in any of three languages current in England, that is, in Anglo-Norman, Latin or English, *pace* Skemer (24). As far as the *Assisa panis* is concerned, I think it would be fair to say that when generic terms suffice each language goes its own way: whole wheat bread appears in Latin as *panis integer de frumento*, in Anglo-Norman as *payn enteer de furment*, in Middle English as *al hol bred*; bread made of any kind of meal - including meal derived from peas - in Latin is called *panis de omni/quoilibet blado*, in Anglo-Norman *payn de tuz blez*, in English *bred of alle kunnel/al maner corne*. When however a technical term is used, generally speaking it is Anglo-Norman which provides the word. For example, the names of the three most expensive types of bread, the *wastel*, the *siminel* and the *coket*, made of the finely bolted flour of top quality wheat, are all Anglo-Norman, and reappear virtually unchanged in the Latin and English *Assise*. Only sometimes do the Latin *Assise* add a Latinate ending, and even then these are often in abbreviated form (*Oak Book* vii). The word used to indicate the bran left behind in the bolting cloth, *trait/tret*, is also Anglo-Norman. On the other hand, the English word *ferling/k* is used in the Anglo-Norman texts to indicate a quarter of a *sou* (Latin *solidus*, Middle English *peni*). It is not impossible that the use of the word *assise* (literally “established,” the feminine past participle of the Anglo-Norman verb *asseer* “to establish”) in the sense of “statute” was suggested by the Old English word *Ʒesettnys* (Middle English *isetnesse*), “statute” (literally “[state of being] established”). For the philologist, indeed, the many extant exemplars of the *Assisa panis*, - contained not only in the *Statuta angliae* and in monastic and manorial cartularies, but also in such volumes

as Bodley MS Jesus 29 (II), fol. 195r (Cartlidge 259), the literary miscellany which contains *The Owl and the Nightingale*, where it is entitled *Assisa panis anglie* - are a fascinating source of knowledge. Written now in one language, now in another, exhibiting all manner of variations in wording and spelling, they offer the student a wonderful insight, not only into the material culture of medieval England, but also into the complex and creative *entrelacements* of its three vehicular languages. However, for the sake of simplicity, when referring in general to the text of the *Assisa* I quote the words in their Latin form. For the same reason I have settled for just one of a number of possible spellings, and ignored the Latinate endings sporadically attributed to words lifted from Anglo-Norman.

To return to *Magna Carta*, and to what it has to say about the weights and measures with which we are concerned: “Una mensura vini sit per totum regnum nostrum, et una mensura cervisie, et una mensura bladi, scilicet quarterium Londoniense...de ponderibus autem sit ut de mensuris.” The price of a quarter of wheat will form the basis for the calculation of the price of bread in relation to the price of wheat, which, together with the reimbursement and the gain to which the baker is entitled, forms the object of the *Assisa panis*. The *quarterium londoniense* is actually a mix of weights and measures, which are carefully set out in a tract, variously entitled, all or part of which often precedes the *Assisa panis* in the MSS (*Fleta* 119). What follows derives from that part of the tract which concerns us¹. The smallest unit is a grain of ripe wheat. Eight grains make a farthing, sixteen grains a halfpenny, thirty-two a silver penny. Twelve pennies make a shilling, twenty shillings a pound, eight pounds a gallon, eight gallons a bushel, eight bushels a quarter. The weights we shall come across in the *Assisa* are the farthing, the halfpenny, the penny, the shilling, the pound and the quarter (512 lbs.). It must of course be borne in mind that the monetary value of a silver penny coincides with its weight - the pennyweight - and this is true of all coins (*Oak Book* xxix). So we shall find the same terms being used to indicate both the weights and the prices of wheat and bread, though in this case weight and price will by no means coincide. For instance, 42 pounds’ weight of wheat, and 27 pounds and 4 shillings’ weight of bread, both correspond to the monetary value of one penny.

Let us now observe the mathematics of the *Assisa panis*, which has been worked out by Ross. What actually happens is that the price of a

quarter of wheat determines the size, or weight, of a farthing loaf of *wastel* bread (and not, as might be expected, the price of a standard size loaf), according to the formula $w p = 136$, where w = weight and p = price in shillings. So when a quarter of wheat costs one shilling, a farthing loaf of *wastel* will cost 136 shillings, that is, 6 lb. 16 s. Starting with the lowest price, one shilling a quarter, the *Assisa* takes the price of wheat up to 20 shillings a quarter, sixpence a time. Obviously, each rise in the price of wheat will correspond to a decrease in the weight of the farthing loaf of bread. The $w p = 136$ formula, introduced by the 1256 *Assisa panis*, replaced another, older one (which curiously enough continued to be applied to wheat prices from three shillings to four shillings and sixpence a quarter). Nearly all the extant *Assise* give the prices and weights of wheat and *wastel* bread, at least up to 12 s. a quarter for wheat: they are usually written out continuously, but are sometimes given in table form.

The weight of the *wastel* (the standard)² determines the weight of five other types of bread, only one of which, the *siminel*, weighs less (that is, costs more) than the *wastel*. These types of bread, in increasing order of weight (and hence decreasing order of price), are: *siminel*, *coket*, *panis integer de frumento*, *panis de tret* and *panis de omni blado*. The *Assisa* establishes that the *siminel* shall for all prices of wheat weigh two shillings less than the *wastel*, the *coket* two shillings more. For the other types of bread it establishes weights proportional to those of the *wastel* and the *coket*: the *panis integer de frumento* shall weigh one and a half times the *coket*, the *panis de tret* twice the *wastel* and the *panis de omni blado* twice the *coket*.

I have yet to encounter an *Assisa* that publishes the weights of bread other than the *wastel*. But MS. Douce lists the weights of the *wastel* alongside those of three other kinds of bread: the *coket*, the *panis integer de frumento* and the *panis de omni blado*. The most expensive bread, the *siminel*, is missing from the list, as is the *panis de tret*, made from the middling part of the husk. The *siminel*, however, does make its appearance in the shortened version of the *Assisa panis* which appears below the list.

We may now take a closer look at MS Douce (reproduced page 42). It was written towards the middle of the fifteenth century on a sheet of smooth, greyish-white parchment³ measuring 54 x 23 cm., and must have hung on a wall or perhaps the back of a door. The hole through which the nail passed, and the curling over of the top edge, are clearly visible. At the

top of the list there is a series of five drawings, each inscribed with a name written in red ink and placed above a column of numbers. The first drawing depicts a sack bearing the words “the saks w^t mele” (“the sacks with flour”), and is placed above the first column, which starts with the price of one shilling. The second drawing shows a round loaf, with the words “the *wastel*” in its centre, and is placed above the second column, which starts with a weight of 6 lb. 16 s. We have here a graphic version of the *Assisa*'s opening words: “When a quarter of wheat shall be sold for 1 s., then a farthing loaf of *wastel* bread shall weigh 6 lb. 16 s...” We even have the “sacks” in the plural because one sack would not be enough to contain a hundredweight of flour.

The farthing *wastel* is seen from above. Its salient features appear to be its round shape and the docking along its outer edge. Many versions of the *Assisa* specify that the *wastel* shall be *albus* - and indeed to prepare it the very finest quality of wheat is sifted through the very finest of bolting cloths - “& bene coctus”: a thorough baking will of course result in a crisp crust and a light, dry crumb. Docking, or pricking the surface of the dough, allows the escape of moisture during cooking and ensures a smooth even surface. This is the reason for the characteristic little holes in shortbread we see today.

The next drawing, which bears the inscription “The ferthȳg wyght loff,” shows the white farthing loaf sideways on. This is the *coket* of the earlier *Assise*: the term will be obsolete by the end of the century, and has evidently already fallen into disuse in MS Douce. From various exemplars of the *Assisa* we learn that the *coket* is made from the same wheat flour as the *wastel*, using the same bolting cloth - that is why it is called “white” in our MS. In some versions of the *Assisa* the *coket* is also described as *panis levatus*, “leavened bread,” and the drawing seems to emphasize, not its shape, as in the case of the *wastel*, but rather how much it has risen. I think it very probable that the difference in weight between the *coket* and *wastel* is due to a difference in the leavening process, to a greater retention of moisture in the *coket* perhaps. The shortened version of the *Assisa* placed below the price-list seems to confirm this impression, for it asserts that the greater weight of the *coket* is due to the *brayng*, which I take to mean “knocking down,” after the first proofing. This would, I assume, make the crumb more dense, less light and airy. So far I have found no other *Assisa* with this explanation of the extra weight of the *coket*.

The third drawing shows “The halpeny wete loff,” the “halfpenny [wholemeal] wheat loaf.” It too is made of wheat, but contains both flour and some or all of the husk, so that it is not as white as the two preceding loaves. In the drawing, the loaf is about one and a half times the size of the *coket*, which would be right if it were a farthing loaf. Since it is a halfpenny loaf, it will of course weigh twice as much as the farthing loaf, and this is borne out by the weights registered in the list. Again, the emphasis of the drawing seems to be on the leavening, rather than on the shape of the loaf.

The last drawing shows “The horse loff,” the “horse loaf.” In the *syse* at the bottom of the page it is described as “bred of al maner corne,” bread made with the meal from any kind of cereal, including peas. Peas were often the source of the meal from which this bread was made, and in his edition of MS. Douce Salter actually erroneously registers the name of this loaf as “pese loff” (“pea loaf”) (135). It is the very cheapest kind of bread, and the name used in our price-list reflects the fact that it was also used as fodder for horses. From the prices it emerges that this, like the *wete loff*, it is a halfpenny, not a farthing loaf, for it weighs four times, not twice, as much as the *coket*: for 2 s. a quarter of wheat, for instance, the *wyght loff* weighs 3 lbs. 10s., the *horse loff* 14 lbs. (exactly four times as much).

We now come to the lists of weights and prices. As far as the numerals are concerned, ten pounds are indicated by a large circle (third column, second row: 10 lbs.); single pounds by small circles (second column, first row: 6 lbs); shillings by Roman numerals (first column, first row: 1 s., second column, first row: 16 s.); pennies by dots (first column, second row: 6 d.); halfpennies by a dot inside a semicircle (first column, fourth row). The numbers that are paler in the photographic reproduction are written in red ink, those that are darker, in black. The colours were meant to alternate both vertically and horizontally, so as to make it easier to keep one's eye on the correct prices and weights. The first row of the first column is black, the second red, and so on; the first row of the second column is red, the second black, and so on. The scribe made a mistake in the fourth column, which starts with black: instead of using red ink for the fourth row he repeated the black. As a result, for the rest of the fourth column the colours of the rows are the same as those of the corresponding rows in the third column. The scribe must not have immediately realized his mistake, otherwise he would have corrected it by repeating the same colour again further down the

fourth column. What he does is to start the fifth column with black, the same colour as the first row of the fourth, so that when he gets to the fourth row his red corresponds to the erroneous black of the fourth column, and from then on the colours in the two last columns alternate.

As far as the price of wheat goes, our list proceeds regularly from one to twenty shillings a quarter. The weights assigned to the *wastel* tally well with the weights I have taken down from a cross section of *Assise*. We do in fact find not a few minor discrepancies between the various versions, both as regards each other and as regards the correct calculations, especially when it comes to halfpennies and farthings (Ross 337-8). Sometimes the differences are due to omissions in copying out the numbers, which is only too easy when using Roman numerals. The weights of the other loaves are also generally correct, except that there are macroscopic errors in the calculation of the weight of the halfpenny *wete loff* and *horse loff* for prices of a quarter of wheat of 1 s. and 1 s. 6 d. For instance, when a quarter of wheat costs 1 s. the *wete loff* and the *hors loff* weigh respectively 4 lbs 4 s. and 8 lbs 12 s., whereas they should weigh 20 lbs. 14 s. (6 lbs. 18 s. x 3) and 27 lbs. 12 s. (6 lbs. 18 s. x 4).

We now come to the *syse* written at the bottom of the list, which for convenience I print below, followed by a translation:

Thys ys y^t syse of al maner of brede what greyne of corne so euyr yt be yt schal be weyd after y^e ferthyng wastel for y^e semnel weyzeth lasse and y^e wastel be ij^s by cause of y^e *seithing* and y^t ferthyng wyght lofe schal wey more than y^t wastel be ij^s be cause of y^e brayng. And y^t halpeny wete lofe schal wey iij ferthyng wythe loffis and y^t lofe of al maner corne schal wey ij ob wyth lofys And the baker schal be alowyd in y^t crafte for fornage iij^d ffor wode iij^d ffor ij pagys j^d ob ffor salt ob for barme ob for candel ob ffor y^t teydogge ob An al y^e brenne to awantage. And thys ys y^e statuyt of wenchester.

(This is the assise/size of every type of bread: of whatever grain of corn it be, it shall be weighed according to the farthing wastel: in fact the simnel weighs less than the wastel by 2 s. because of the cooking and the farthing white loaf shall weigh 2 s. more than the wastel because of the kneading. And the halfpenny wheat loaf shall weigh 3 farthing white loaves and the loaf of all kinds of corn shall weigh 2 farthing white loaves. And for this job the baker shall be allowed for the use of the oven 3 d., for the wood 3 d., for 2 assistants 1½ d., for salt ½ d., for yeast ½ d., for a candle ½ d., for the kneading board ½ d. And all the bran for himself. And this is the statute of Winchester.)

The standard version of the *Assisa panis* starts with the weight of the farthing *wastel* when a quarter of wheat costs a shilling (this first sentence, as we have seen, is graphically represented by the first two drawings, together with the first row of columns 1 and 2, of our price list)⁴. It immediately goes on to consider the relationship of the different kinds of bread, and their weight, to the *wastel*, before listing the weights of the *wastel* for the various ranges in the price of wheat. In MS Douce, on the other hand, the list of prices and weights precedes the explanation of the relationship between the *wastel* and the other types of bread. The name of the *Assisa panis* is paraphrased in the introductory sentence, which we do not find in the standard *Assisa*: “Thys ys y^t syse of al maner of brede what greyne of corne so euyr yt be yt schal be weyd after y^e ferthyng wastel.” It is of interest to note the aphetic *syse*, which by now may be taken to mean both “statute” and “size.”

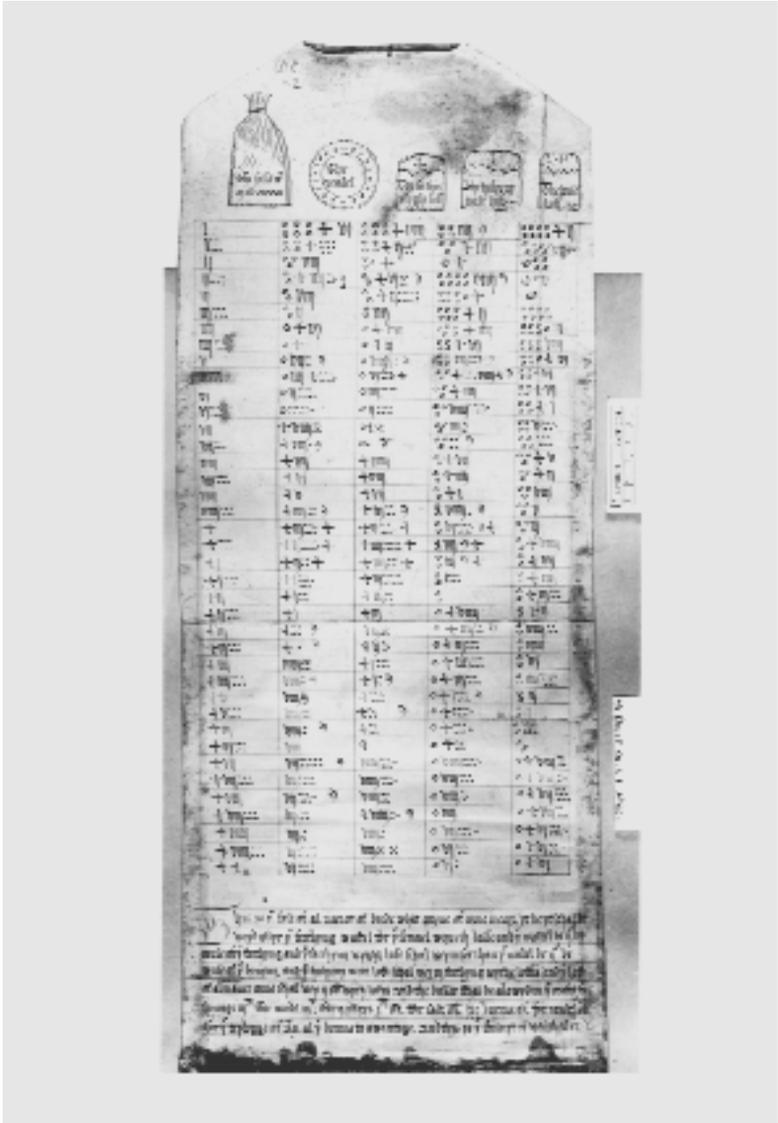
I have already considered the explanation offered by our *syse* for the greater weight of the *wyght loff (coket)* as compared to the *wastel*. The *semnel*, which is not included in the drawings at the top of our price-list, makes its appearance here. Whereas the *Assisa panis* explains that the *siminel* is lighter than the *wastel* because it is *bis coctus*, our text says it is lighter “by cause of y^e ferthyng.” In a footnote to his edition of the *syse* (135), Salter writes that “*seithyng* must be meant.” His proposed emendation finds confirmation in a mid fourteenth century *assise* included in Registrum A of the University of Oxford Statutes, fol. 98v, which states that the *symnel* is lighter than the *wastell* “for hit is y soden” (Salter 134). The verb *se(i)then*, p.p. *soden*, can mean to boil, bake or cook: the *semnel* was in fact first thrown into boiling water, then baked in the oven, like cracknels and pretzels today.

MS. Douce makes no mention of the bread of *tret*, made with the middling parts of the wheat husk, nor of a second, coarser type of *coket*, both of which appear in the original *Assisa*. The seven types of bread contemplated in the *Assisa* were eventually to be reduced to three categories (Webb 197): white bread (made of wheat flour), wholemeal bread (made of the whole grain of wheat) and household bread (made of the whole grain of less expensive types of cereal). Our price-list is witness to a halfway stage.

The *syse* identifies itself as the “statuyt of wenchester.” A Statute of Winchester was indeed enacted in 1285, but it has nothing to do with the price of bread. We may have here a reflection of the fact that the “London

measure” of *Magna Carta* was also known as the “Winchester measure,” and our *syse* may simply mean that the weights and prices involved in the list are in compliance with the national standard.

In conclusion, I should like very briefly to consider one case in which documents such as MS. Douce impinge upon literary texts. I shall quote some lines from *Havelok the Dane*, a verse romance written in English at the turn of the fourteenth century. It relates how, when still a boy, Havelok becomes heir to the throne of Denmark through his father’s death. His life is put in jeopardy by the machinations of an evil guardian. Before ordering a man named Grim to kill Havelok, the guardian almost has the boy starve to death. Havelok begs him for food, and exclaims “Weilawei! nis it no korn / þat men micte maken of bred?” (“Alas! Is there no corn / With which to make bread?”; 462-3). Havelok is saved by Grim, the very man his evil guardian has ordered to kill him. After setting sail from Denmark and landing in Lincolnshire in the company of Grim and his family, Havelok spends some years in their household. For a time Grim makes a very good living out of fishing, and can afford to provide his family with the best that money can buy: “For hom he brouthe fele sipe / Wastels, simenels...” (“Indeed he often brought home / *Wastels*, *simenels*...”; 779-80). A famine forces Havelok to leave home in search of sustenance. In the vicinity of the local castle, he runs into the royal cook, who is looking for porters, and succeeds in securing the job for himself. On his arrival at the castle, he is rewarded with a *wastel* - or, to be more precise, with a farthing *wastel* loaf: “And bar þe mete to þe castel / And gat him þere a ferþing *wastel*” (“And he carried the food to the castle / And there received a farthing *wastel*”; 878-9). Thanks to our perusal of MS. Douce and the legal documents on which it is based, we now know that the *korn* will have been weighed according to the *quarterium londoniense*, and that if the year was a good one, and the price of wheat at a minimum, a *ferþing wastel* will have weighed 6 lb. 16 s. We know moreover that the *wastel* and the *simenel* are at the top of the baker’s price range, that the *wastel* and the *simenel* are made of the most finely bolted flour of the finest wheat, that the *wastel* is round, and docked like our modern shortbread, and that the *simenel* is first boiled then baked like modern cracknels and pretzels. In the opinion of this reader, knowledge of material culture, far from being superfluous or irrelevant, enhances the understanding and enjoyment of works created by the literary imagination.



MS. Douce Charters a 1, no.62.

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- 1 A Latin and Middle English version of the text (The Schøyen Collection MS. 563, fol. 76r and Rawlinson MS. B 520, fol. 42v, respectively) are printed in the appendix to a paper at press (Fennell). I take this opportunity to thank Martin Schøyen for generously allowing me to consult his manuscripts in an ideal setting.
- 2 Space does not allow me to go into the interesting question of the uncertain origins of some of the terms we encounter in our *Assise* for the various types of bread. However, I should mention an intriguing outcome of the discussion that followed the reading of this paper: the possibility of a connection between Anglo-Norman *wastel*, Arab *wast* and Sicilian *vastedda*. Mario Casari, Salvatore Marano and I are at present developing a joint research project on the subject.
- 3 My thanks to Dr. Bruce Barker-Benfield for giving me his opinion on the dating and physical description of the manuscript.
- 4 Latin, Anglo-Norman and Middle English versions of the *Assisa* (Peterborough MS. 1, fol. 86r, Jesus MS. 29 II, fol. 195r, The Schøyen Collection MS. 563, fol. 76 and Rawlinson MS. B 520, fols. 43v-44r, respectively) are printed in the appendix to a paper at press (Fennell).



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