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Food and the middle ages

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A B S T R A C T

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The study of food in the middle ages attracted much interest among antiquarians from the eighteenth century on. New perspectives came with the growth of social and economic history. Over the last two decades, re-evaluations of historical sources, along with contributions from other disciplines, especially archaeology, the archaeological sciences, anthropology and sociology, have changed the possibilities for this area of research. The study of cooking, of cuisine and its cultural context, as much as food production and the material conditions of life, is now central to developing our understanding of consumption. This paper explores new possibilities for the study of taste and demotic cuisine, food and virtue, the association of women with food, and the role of food in society and in cultural change.

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It is hardly surprising that food is ubiquitous in our sources for the middle ages; what is less expected is that interest in food in the past has not been more in the mainstream of study in history or in related disciplines. There are now ample signs that this is changing and historians expect to consider a wide range of topics intimately connected to food: the place of fasting and feasting; the relationship with virtue and religion; taboos; physical arrangements for cooking, along with the development and training of cooks; the role of gastronomy, the development of taste and specialised food products; food grammar — the structure and timing of meals; food preservation and marketing; technological change and new foods; famine and glut; group diets, regional and wider food cultures; seasonality, wild foods and hunting; and connections to nutrition and to demography. It is a list easily susceptible to expansion. With it have come important developments in the availability and use of evidence, and an interest in the interpretative models of cognate disciplines.

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If it has not been in the mainstream, there is nonetheless a long pedigree to the study of food in the past. In England, the work of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquaries, like Samuel Pegge, Richard Warner, T. H. Turner, F. J. Furnivall and T. Austin, encompassed collections of recipes, domestic manners and culture, courtesy books and household antiquities generally.¹ This interest in dining experience and the establishments of the great was mirrored elsewhere, but it was long considered marginal to historical study.² Social and economic history from its inception used food to underpin debates about standards of living,³ of which it remains an important part.⁴ How food contributed to material conditions of life was an important theme in the work of the Annales school and the great regional studies which appeared in the decades after World War II.⁵ The trajectory of this research, however, was antipathetic to an appreciation of culinary experience, either at an elite level or, indeed, at any other one, focusing instead on a quantitative approach to diet: this was the study of *alimentation*, of commodities, their cultivation, production, marketing and of nourishment, rather than *cuisine*, an appreciation of the cultural connotations of food preparation, cooking and consumption.⁶ More recently, this latter dimension has been recognised as a subject worthy of study at all social levels, from the role of classes of foodstuffs, such as fats and oils, in cooking practices to the ensembles of foodways that constitute cuisines.⁷ Other studies have embraced a wider range of evidence, for example, looking at representations of the cooking process in art.⁸

Food has been seen as one of the drivers of European life, its economy and culture. One can follow, for example, the patterns of the corn trade, from Africa and Sicily, to Rome, and to Byzantium in the fourth and fifth centuries, and its interruptions and resumptions as patterns of imperial power in the west disintegrated.⁹ These movements are much more difficult to reconstruct in periods and places

¹ Pegge's work was reprinted in R. Warner, *Antiquitates culinariae. Tracts on culinary affairs of the Old English* (London, 1791); T.H. Turner, 'Usages of domestic life in the middle ages: I. The dining table', *Archaeological Journal*, 2 (1846), 173–80, 258–66; *The babees' book*, ed. F.J. Furnivall (Early English Text Society, Original Series [hereafter EETS, OS] 32, London, 1868); *Two fifteenth-century cookery books*, ed. T. Austin (EETS, OS 91, London, 1888).

² B. Laurioux, *Le Règne de Taillevent. Livres et pratiques culinaires à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris, 1997), 6–12, on eighteenth-century French studies and their successors; *Le Ménagier de Paris, composé vers 1393 par un bourgeois parisien*, ed. J. Pichon, 2 vols (Paris, 1846), now translated as *The good wife's guide: le ménagier de Paris. A medieval household book*, with introduction by G.L. Greco and C.M. Rose (Ithaca, 2009); *Le Viandier de Guillaume Tirel dit Taillevent*, ed. J. Pichon and G. Vicaire (Paris, 1892), re-edited as *The Viandier of Taillevent. An edition of all extant manuscripts*, ed. T. Scully (Ottawa, 1988).

³ Studies include W.J. Ashley, *The bread of our forefathers. An inquiry in economic history* (Oxford, 1928); the work of W.H. Beveridge on prices and wages: 'The yield and price of corn in the middle ages', *Economic History Review*, 1st series, 1 (1929), 93–113; *Prices and wages in England from the twelfth to the nineteenth century*, ed. W.H. Beveridge and others (London, 1939: one volume only).

⁴ C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages. Social change in England c.1200–1520*, revised edn (Cambridge, 1998), *passim*, but especially 55–70, 151–60, 260–73.

⁵ See the bulletins on 'Vie matérielle et comportements biologiques' in *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* [hereafter *Annales ÉSC*], 16 (1961), 545–74, 723–71, 959–86; 17 (1962), 75–94, 318–31, 885–922; 18 (1963), 133–41, 521–40, 1133–52; 19 (1964), 467–79, 933–7; regional studies, many focusing on the *longue durée*, for example, J.C. Drummond and A. Wilbraham, *The Englishman's food. Five centuries of English diet* (London, 1939); the work of Maria Dembińska, *Konsumpcja żywnościowa w Polsce średniowiecznej* (Warsaw, 1963), now translated and reworked by W. Woys Weaver as *Food and drink in medieval Poland. Rediscovering a cuisine of the past* (Philadelphia, 1999); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc*, 2 vols (Paris, 1966); P. Goubert, *Cent mille provinciaux au XVII^e siècle. Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (Paris, 1968); L. Stouff, *Ravitaillement et alimentation en Provence au XIV^e et XV^e siècles* (Paris, 1970); M.T. Lorcin, *Vivre et mourir en lyonnais à la fin du moyen âge* (Lyon, 1981). Contrast the comments of B. Laurioux, *Gastronomie, humanisme et société à Rome au milieu du XV^e siècle. Autour du De honesta voluptate de Platina* (Florence, 2006), 347–8, on the impasse reached by the 'second' history of food, that of the Annales school, with its quantitative perspectives, and the discouragement it offered to medievalists, with the vitality of this approach in Anglo-Saxon contexts, e.g. B.F. Harvey, *Living and dying in England 1100–1540. The monastic experience* (Oxford, 1993), 34–71, 216–30.

⁶ Laurioux, *Le Règne de Taillevent*, 12–13.

⁷ J.L. Flandrin, 'Le Goût et la nécessité: sur l'usage des graisses dans les cuisines d'Europe occidentale (XIV^e–XVIII^e siècle)', *Annales ÉSC*, 38 (1983), 369–401; Laurioux, *Gastronomie, humanisme et société à Rome*, 441–529, on fifteenth-century papal cooking.

⁸ J. Van Winter, 'Mittelalterliche Kochkunst', in: *Rotterdam Papers II*, ed. J.G.N. Renaud (Rotterdam, 1975), 197–200; and B.A. Henisch, *The medieval cook* (Woodbridge, 2009), developing her *Fast and feast. Food in medieval society* (University Park, PA, 1976).

⁹ Described in, for example, C. Wickham, *Framing the early middle ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), 19–22, 72–3, 87–93, 710–15.

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