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The Medieval Kitchen: A Social History with Recipes

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It is possible today to admire reconstructions of medieval kitchens at several historical monuments across Europe. Many of these displays have been carefully researched and tend to provide a fascinating insight into aspects of everyday life in the Middle Ages. The subject has, however, not received an equal level of attention in the historical literature and I was looking forward to reading a whole monograph dedicated to the medieval kitchen. Once I had the opportunity to delve into this nicely produced book I soon realised, however, that it was not quite what I had expected. This is not a book about the ?kitchen?, intended in its common English meaning as the room where food is prepared, but it is rather about diet and food consumption. The word ?kitchen? is here intended to mean ?cuisine?, a more rarely used, but ? according to the Oxford English Dictionary ? not incorrect interpretation of the term. My discovery mildly disappointed me, not because of a lack of interest in the subject, but rather because, unlike the kitchen interpreted as a room, a rich literature already exists on medieval food consumption (this is summarised in chapter ten of the book). In reviewing this book I have therefore focused on the extent to which it adds something new and original to the current published output.

The book is beautifully illustrated with almost 200 pictures, many in colour; all are vivid representations of

medieval life, many well-known, but others less so. It consists of three main components ? the main text, a number of helpful insets included in each chapter to focus on specific themes, and a final section of suggested recipes in medieval style. The main text comprises ten chapters, which, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion, deal with the production and (mainly) consumption of bread (chapter two), vegetables (three), meat (four), fish (five), sauces and spices (six), dairy products and eggs (seven), desserts (eight) and beverages (nine). Over 60 suggested recipes are described at the end; they include a list of ingredients and some preparation instructions. The chronological focus is on the late Middle Ages (c.1300?1550), and the area covered is supposed to encompass the whole of Europe. The author is Finnish, undertook her doctoral studies in the Netherlands, and lives in England, therefore providing the kind of internationality this book could benefit from. The book was originally written (but not published) in Finnish, translated into English by Anne Strauss and then further edited by the author herself. Although she originally wrote the book in her native language it is clear that Klemettilä is very proficient in English as ? at least to the eyes of this non-native English speaker reviewer ? nothing in the prose betrays the fact that the text was translated. The writing flows nicely and it is very clear and accessible.

The book relies mainly on documentary evidence, though iconographic sources are also considered. There is also the intention, expressed in the introductory chapter (p. 8), to integrate the historical data with the archaeological evidence. This, however, remains mainly a hypothetical aspiration, as references to archaeological data in the book are few and far. The handful of examples in which the archaeological evidence is mentioned are all focused on the Baltic area and all that is provided is the odd reference to the occurrence of some animal or plant remains found at archaeological sites, rather than any interpretation of their presence there. These results are also without citations(an issue on which I will return later) and, considering that the only archaeological reference provided in the reading list is a PhD thesis (!) on medieval and post-medieval Turku (Finland), I must assume that this is the only archaeological source that was consulted. It does therefore seem that the inclusion of archaeology in the book only represents a small token gesture ? severely limited in scope and geographic range ? towards another discipline. This is partly understandable, as the author is a historian by background, and clearly more at ease with the deciphering of old texts rather than the material remains of our past. It is, however, important to make clear to the potential reader that, despite what claimed in the introduction, this is a book in which the archaeological evidence plays a negligible part.

The need to integrate history and archaeology partly stems from the fact that the two sources have their own gaps and biases and they can thus be complementary. The documentary evidence clearly privileges accounts of the life of the upper classes and has limited information about foodstuffs that were not sold and purchased and therefore did not make theirway in household accounts. Wild plants, mushrooms and vegetables from the garden could belong to this category, as well as any other food that was produced as part of a self-sufficient economy (which was much more likely to typify the lower classes). The author is aware of this issue and warns us, from time to time, of such potential biases. The vast archaeological literature on food consumption in the Middle Ages can contribute to fill some of these gaps, but for such accounts the reader will have to look elsewhere.(1) There the reader will discover that, although the archaeological evidence supports some of the claims made by historians, in other cases it alerts us to the danger of relying on a single source of evidence. For instance the claim made in this book that ?pork was the most common type of meat consumed? (p. 63) will in many areas be contradicted by archaeological data that provides information on the relative representation of different types of livestock. The claim that in Italy ?beef had to be brought in from abroad? (p. 63) will also be seen with great scepticism by archaeologists who will have studied innumerable cattle bones from archaeological sites across the region.

At its onset the book appears to have a core message to provide. Basically, the author claims that the notorious eating excesses of the medieval upper classes have been exaggerated and that there was an abundance of food (apart from times of famine) available to all social classes, including the peasantry. In her own words, ?a peasant in the Middle Ages did not eat a great deal worse than his master landlord? (p. 11) and ?under normal circumstances the difference between the diet of lesser noblemen and that of their labourers was not particularly significant? (p. 13). It is worth highlighting the caution of the author in

leaving open the possibility that the diet of the highest echelons of the society may indeed have been substantially different. Even so, the basic argument is interesting and not entirely uncontroversial, and it would have been worth exploring it further. This is, however, a problematic aspect of this book on two different levels, which are both worth exploring in some detail.

The first problem is that an editorial choice was made not to include in-text references. This means that, despite the fact that there are no reasons to believe that the book is less than thoroughly researched, there is no opportunity to verify that there are any solid foundations behind any statements that are made. This does not necessarily weaken Klemettilä?s argument, but leaves it in the realm of generic opinions. Whether her statement is justified or not, we cannot say, as no verifiable evidence is presented in its support. To make things even more complicated there is some important literature on diet in the Middle Ages which does not necessarily contradict Klemettilä?s argument, but does not support it either. For instance Montanari?s work on the medieval peasantry in Italy (2) and Dyer?s work on the life of the lower classes in England (3) provide useful insights in the everyday struggle for survival that could characterise the less well-off from medieval society. At the other end of the social spectrum, Woolgar?s account of the diet of the English nobility (4) and Harvey?s complementary evidence of the clergy (5) indicate that a sustained wealth of food resources, beyond those that could ever be afforded by the lower classes, was indeed possible. Sumptuous banquets comprised of an endless list of exotic and unusual food items only represented occasional events, but the everyday consumption of food by the upper classes seems unlikely to have been modest, and included a remarkable amount of meat. This is another area in which the oversight of the archaeological evidence appears painfully evident. Results from excavations of high status sites, such as castles and manor houses, indicate that venison was regularly consumed, while deer bones are rare in towns and villages. The same applies for several species of wild birds and freshwater fish, whose procurement was also restricted by the law.(6)

The second issue with Klemettilä?s point is that, after having stated in the introductory chapter that there were no substantial differences in the type of food consumption across medieval society, this claim fizzles out in the rest of the book, where the presented evidence can even be used to contradict the original point. For instance, at different points in the book it is stated that some food items ? spices being the most obvious example (p. 90) - would have to be imported and, as such, they were expensive and therefore only affordable to the wealthy few. This must have unquestionably contributed to a different taste in the cuisine of different social classes. Some foods (varying obviously across geographic areas) also appear to have been identified with the poor; these include porridge (p. 41), pasta (p. 44), cabbage, beans and lentils (p. 53). The overall more meaty diet of the rich is also recognised at various points in the book (for example, pp. 51, 54, 63). Cooking practices also varied and it is for instance pointed out that roasting on an open fire was mainly practiced in the kitchens of the upper classes, and ?the handling of roasts was part of the education of upper-class youths? (p. 72). The great cost of fresh fish (pp.78, 80) also means that preserved fish was all peasants could generally afford, while oysters, like today, were regarded to be a luxury item (p. 82). Returning to spices, it is interesting to read that the poor had their own surrogates, such as juniper berries and garlic (p. 92), while imported spices such as pepper, saffron, ginger and cinnamon were generally beyond their reach. Fruits and nuts were also often imported, particularly in northern countries, raising thus their cost and making them difficult to afford for the peasantry who, in the north at least, had to be content with apples and pears (p. 117). Almond milk is mentioned throughout the book as an important cookery item but, considering the high cost of almonds in countries where they could not be produced locally, it is difficult to imagine it being much used in the cuisine of the lower classes. In short, plenty of evidence is provided that is suggestive of substantial differences in the diet of rich and poor.

Although the book is slightly biased towards evidence from northern countries, this is at the same time its strength, as literature in Finnish is made available to a readership who would by and large find such sources inaccessible. Remarkably, the story that emerges from the Nordic countries is not that different from the rest of Europe, though northern regions would have had a smaller range of local products than the South. In the late medieval period Europe lived in an economic climate that was already much affected by market forces. Trade was widespread, and those who could afford them had access to a great variety of products. As a

consequence, across Europe there were remarkable similarities in the diet of the upper classes (p. 28). This means that in order to identify regional cuisines it may be more promising to look at the food habits of the lower classes. Both historical and archaeological research on medieval diet requires greater efforts in international comparisons and this book provides some interesting leads that have the potential to be developed further.

All in all I consider this book to cover part of the same ground as other ?semi-popular? volumes on past food habits, but it also has a sufficient element of originality to make it stand out from the existing literature. The addition of recipes at the end of the book is probably a marketing strategy devised to make the book more appealing to the general public, and they probably add little of interest to the more academically inclined reader. The lack of references (apart from a generic reading list at the end), the insufficient integration of different lines of evidence and the oversight of some major academic literature on the topic (admittedly vast) are probably the major shortcomings of the book. In sum, if one is looking for a book on medieval diet that has nice pictures, many interesting anecdotes and a fluent and readable prose, this volume is ideal. For an in-depth and authoritative analysis of food consumption in the Middle Ages it is, however, necessary to look elsewhere.

Notes

1. *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*,ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson and Tony Waldron (Oxford, 2006).Back to (1)
2. Massimo Montanari, *L?Alimentazione Contadina nell?Alto Medioeveo*, (Napoli, 1979).Back to (2)
3. Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages. Social Change in England c.1200?1520*, (Cambridge, 1989).Back to (3)
4. Christopher Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England*, (New Haven, CT, 1999).Back to (4)
5. Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England 1100?1540: the Monastic Experience*, (Oxford, 1993). Back to (5)
6. Umberto Albarella and Simon Davis, *Mammals and Birds from Launceston Castle, Cornwall: Decline in Status and the Rise of Agriculture*, (York, 1996); Naomi Sykes, *The Norman Conquest: A Zooarchaeological Perspective*, (Oxford, 2007); Richard Thomas, *Animals, Economy and Status: Integrating Zooarchaeological and Historical Data in the Study of Dudley Castle, West Midlands (c.1100?1750)*, (Oxford, 2005).Back to (6)

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