

Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition

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As the editors Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron underline on the first page of the introduction to this book, 'food and diet are rightly popular areas of research, central to understanding daily life in the middle ages'. The study of medieval food culture is certainly one that is actively pursued across many European institutions, but, as the editors eloquently demonstrate, scholarly syntheses remain limited in both their number and scope. This book, the culmination of a series of annual meetings held by the Diet Group at Somerville College, Oxford, is a novel and bold 'reappraisal' of multiple aspects of food culture across the entire span of the middle ages. Framed by critical introductory and concluding chapters, seventeen papers draw on written, archaeological, and artistic sources to explore diverse aspects of medieval English food culture with reference to continental examples where appropriate.

The content is sub-divided into two sections: part one is a survey of foodstuffs and part two consists of case studies in diet and nutrition. The survey begins with a paper by David Stone exploring the most important foodstuff in medieval England—grain—which represented the highest contributor to people's general calorific intake. Stone considers its complete lifecycle, from the management of the full range of field crops to the production of pottage, bread, and ale. An impressive series of estimates of bread and ale production and consumption punctuate a concise analysis of dynamic patterns on either side of the Black Death, demonstrating how changing pressure on agricultural resources prompted shifts in consumption at every level of society. From the overarching role of agriculture in medieval English dietary regimes, Christopher

Dyer's chapter moves the survey towards a consideration of the role of garden produce based on abundant and diverse late-medieval documentary sources, as well as by reference to earthworks and archaeological excavations. He explores the dietary contribution of 'an integral part of the English economy in the later middle ages' (p. 33), typically neglected by scholars, outlining the scale of gardening, the diversity and distribution of garden produce, and its relative significance. As with Stone's examination of socially distinct uses of grain, Dyer clearly demonstrates how garden produce varied between rich and poor, and how this pattern changed over time. Vegetables, grown more intensively in towns than in the countryside, appear to have provided a higher proportion of food for the lowest levels of medieval society. Lisa Moffett concludes the survey of plant contributions to medieval English diets with a comprehensive look at plant remains in archaeological contexts, neatly complementing the predominantly documentary-based perspectives of the earlier chapters. Her archaeobotanical synthesis draws attention to the value of integrating different types of data, highlighting various patterns of plant consumption, particularly in urban contexts.

Naomi Sykes introduces the role of animal products in medieval diets with an ambitious synthesis of the management, distribution, and consumption of cattle and sheep in medieval England. Her survey spans the full length of the middle ages—from the fifth to the sixteenth centuries—and presents a coherent integration of zooarchaeological and documentary data. Sykes examines chronological trends, focusing on the reconstructed demography of herds, and moves on to consider social variation between rural, urban, and aristocratic sites, clearly linking livestock management and processing with contemporary socio-political structures. She considers butchery in a separate section but highlights the economic and nutritional significance of secondary products. Pigs, together with cattle and sheep, represent the most frequently occurring animals on medieval archaeological sites in England, and, indeed, much of Europe. However, they were bred exclusively for meat rather than secondary products; a role considered separately by Umberto Albarella. Extending his survey from the early- to late-medieval periods, Albarella considers changing social and geographic trends in pig husbandry, demonstrating how increasingly closer control of breeding resulted in higher meat output, the creation of regional types, and, ultimately, distinct breeds. Pork appears to have been the second most often consumed meat in medieval England, but like Sykes, Albarella situates the management of this animal within the social context of medieval communities. In the following chapter, Christopher Woolgar reviews the conclusions of Albarella and Sykes in the context of documentary sources for meat and dairy products in late-medieval England. Tackling the familiar trends in socially-distinct patterns of consumption, as well as the role of different species, he demonstrates how dairy products, in particular, formed an important nutritional element in dietary regimes before the Black Death, and how socially-distinct patterns were re-aligned following the widespread increase in meat consumption in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Numerous studies have emphasized the fundamental role of fish in medieval dietary regimes, underpinned by religious prohibitions on meat consumption. This topic is examined, with an updated synthesis, by Dale Serjeantson and Christopher Woolgar. Fish consumption in medieval England can be reconstructed from both written and archaeological sources; the former best reflecting the experience of later-medieval aristocratic and religious households, with the latter particularly invaluable for understanding fish exploitation in the early-medieval period. Chronological trends in the changing exploitation of individual species are based on detailed analyses of fish remains from a range of sites spanning the middle ages, subsequently complemented by a focused examination of late-medieval aristocratic household and monastic records. The authors draw attention to major changes in fish consumption which became established in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, reflecting a diversification of species and habitat exploitation. However, the role of religious observance in driving fish consumption is not so clear; religion clearly played a role in the development of the north-European cod and herring fisheries, and in the wake of the Reformation fish become comparatively less popular foodstuffs, but their increasing popularity in the high-medieval period can also be linked to the provisioning needs of growing towns.

The next two chapters consider the role of birds in medieval English diets. Firstly, Dale Serjeantson presents a survey of bird remains from a series of sites spanning the middle ages. She highlights the role of certain species in socially-distinct dietary regimes; whilst chickens and geese were widely eaten at all levels of

society, the consumption of wild birds was closely associated with their acquisition—the sport of falconry. The uneven regional distribution of certain species accounts for varying patterns in exploitation, whereas the most diverse exploitation of birds can be consistently linked with high-status groups. This observation is reinforced in David Stone's investigation of late-medieval bird consumption based on documentary sources. Focusing on the Black Death as a significant episode in changing patterns of bird exploitation, Stone clearly illustrates how the increase in the diversity and number of species consumed in the later-medieval period took place at all levels of society, with evidence for increasing specialization particularly on demesne farms.

The final foodstuff to be considered in the book is game—the quintessential meat of the medieval aristocratic diet in England and continental Europe. Naomi Sykes, drawing on both zooarchaeological and written sources, assesses the impact of the Norman Conquest on hunting culture and the changing exploitation of game, particularly deer. Sykes demonstrates that the creation of a new hunting culture, as an expression of Anglo-Norman identity, resulted in a clarified ranking of meat and the restriction of venison to the elite class; a significant departure from the late-Anglo-Saxon period. Jean Birrell takes up the role of venison in later-medieval English society, tracking its acquisition from hunting reserves through to its preparation, preservation, and consumption. Drawing predominantly on household accounts, Birrell demonstrates that whilst venison remained the distinctive marker of the aristocratic diet, its consumption varied within the upper echelons of society—it was largely a monopoly of the Crown and the most powerful landowners. Both chapters link the acquisition of venison, as well as its consumption, with the construction of elite identity.

The survey of foodstuffs in medieval England represented by these twelve papers reaffirms that social identities are central to the construction of dietary regimes. It is therefore appropriate for these various identities to be explored in the first case study outlined by Christopher Woolgar. He considers two expressions of group diets: religious restrictions and social competition. Woolgar examines the examples set by religious figures in promoting abstinence from meat amongst specific groups within medieval society; strict dietary regimes substituting fish for meat were the hallmark of monastic communities and to a lesser extent secular households. However, in a society where meat and fish were comparative luxuries, people at the lower levels were effectively unable to participate in this ideological expression. At the same time, domestic regulations and practice used diet to communicate varying forms of status. Woolgar also briefly considers the role of food in contemporary paradigms of healthcare and dietetics, as well as the notion of Jewish and military dietary practices. He emphasises the importance of diet as a reflection of the inner virtue of the consumer; rather than a predominant interest in nutritional content, the features of group diets in medieval society reflected ideological concerns. These trends were set by monastic and aristocratic groups, in turn providing models for lower status aspirations.

Christopher Dyer continues the focus on socially-distinct diets, but moves on to examine how seasonal patterns in food consumption by various groups were marked in the late-medieval period. In exploring how medieval diets varied throughout the year, Dyer traces the changing availability of different foods, variability in storage and distribution, religious and family calendars as well as personal preferences. These influenced dietary regimes at all levels of society, although Dyer underlines that upper class diets also contained a significant element of choice as well as conditioning.

Barbara Harvey begins the fifteenth chapter with a shift in focus to the nature and diversity of monastic pittance; the provision of extra dishes at dinner and supper accommodated within the Rule. She demonstrates how the system of pittance reflected the monastic response to secular standards of living—narrowing the gap between the two—and how they came to be viewed as superior food enhancing monastic living into the late-medieval period, even being actively used in competitive recruitment.

Gundula Müldner and Michael Richards present a completely contrasting case study, considering the evidence of stable isotopes in exploring medieval diets. Isotope analysis is contrasted with historical and archaeological studies in that it provides evidence for comparatively broad patterns, rather than specific insights. Its traditional application has been in the field of prehistoric archaeology, and the authors track its growing application in medieval archaeology before outlining how this technique can be applied to further

our understanding of medieval diet. By considering a variety of social groups—urban, rural, and monastic—as well as regional diversity, Müldner and Richards demonstrate the potential of future isotopic work on medieval dietary regimes, particularly regarding the relative role of different food classes from one social and regional context to the next.

Phillip Schofield then considers the link between medieval diet and demography; the relationship between the changing availability of food and standards of health—nutrition and mortality—in the medieval English population. There is no straightforward correlation, and Schofield introduces his analysis with theoretical frameworks from demographic and economic studies, particularly the work of Malthus, Fogel, McKeown, and Livi-Bacci. Focusing on the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, Schofield carefully considers the evidence for demography and food availability, resulting in a cautious conclusion which sees diet as potentially playing a role in population dynamics, but given the nature of the evidence, he suggests that the exact character of this role is very difficult to scrutinize.

Tony Waldron continues to explore the link between nutrition and health with a survey of osteoarchaeological evidence for dietary variation from a range of medieval sites. Deficiency or excess in food consumption can leave traces on the skeleton, and Waldron focuses more on illustrating the diversity of these traces with specific, detailed examples than attempting to synthesise this data into chronological and social trends. Like isotopic techniques, Waldron's chapter suggests this is a potentially fruitful area for future research, one which will bring archaeologists and historians together in seeking answers to common questions.

By maintaining a focus on England, the numerous perspectives and types of evidence brought together in the volume represent a consistent synthesis and analysis; the comprehensive survey of foodstuffs complementing the series of case studies. The major themes are eloquently brought together in the concluding chapter by the editors; availability and diversity of foodstuffs are summarized, followed by seasonal patterns and socially-distinct dietary regimes, the role of drink, regional differentiation, importation, and, perhaps most interestingly of all, a comparison of England to other parts of northern Europe where a range of similarities and contrasts are supported with specific examples. The editors conclude with an optimistic appraisal of the strengths, weaknesses, and future potential of the various strands of evidence and perspectives brought together in the volume. What is most clearly demonstrated, as the editors conclude, is that diet had a range of visible consequences for the individual, but its impact at the demographic level is more difficult to map. As our understanding of local, group, and regional dietary nuances grows, it will become increasingly possible to attempt broader syntheses. The benefits of inter-disciplinary approaches, as well as the focus on local variation with the aim of understanding regional and inter-regional diversity, characterize the cutting edge of modern medieval studies.

The volume is set out accessibly. References in footnotes are presented in the Harvard citation style, whilst extended notes are kept to a minimum, enabling quick and consistent use of the bibliography at the end. The papers are well illustrated with a total of nineteen images, thirty-nine figures, and twenty-five tables, and their contents are readily accessible through a detailed index. The comprehensive breadth of topics within a single volume on medieval food is unprecedented; this book—a successful fusion of multiple perspectives and data—has set a new standard for current understanding and future research.

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