
H-France Review Vol. 3 (December 2003), No. 142

Bonnie Effros, *Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xviii + 174 pp. Figures, notes bibliography and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-312-22736-1.

Review by Veronika Grimm, Yale University.

This small volume is a welcome addition to the growing number of historical studies that recognize the importance of food and food-related attitudes and customs in the life of societies and, consequently, in historical developments. Human beings evolved as strongly social animals. In addition to their long infancy, which necessitated extended adult care, the need for group support may have grown from the cooperation that was required for the hunt by our ancestors, hunters and scavengers, to obtain their food. Presumably, the group that hunted together shared the food and ate together. In the course of time, societies changed and cultures developed and diverged in various ways, one from the other, but the pleasure in sharing food with others seems to have remained constant through the ages. Questions concerning the manner in which various human groups satisfied this need for communal feasting, what significance they attached to it, what rituals they built around it, and other questions like these have interested sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists; now, finally, historians also are beginning to recognize the possibilities that are inherent in the study of foodways. [1]

Bonnie Effros, who is a historian and archaeologist, chooses the rather poorly documented Merovingian period in Gaul, from the break-up of the Roman empire in the West up to the end of the seventh century, to trace transformations in communal food-sharing and the various uses to which food sharing, food giving, and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, food refusal could be put in the church's struggles for dominance. The author's aim is to elucidate the many symbolic aspects of food and food giving in this particular historical period. The work is not concerned with actual food, its production, or general distribution.

The book consists of five essays, and the common thread that runs through them is the social significance of food. The first essay discusses the conflicting ways Christian clerics regarded the ancient institution of communal feasting, the Roman *convivium*, and the many attempts that were made to abolish it or at least to attach new Christian meaning to it by defining, even legislating, who could partake and who should be excluded from the feasting. The next two essays deal with the role that eating, drinking, or refraining from food played in the expression of clerical identity. They also consider the question of gender and authority, especially the importance of self-starvation while feeding others in women's quest for authority. The author discusses conflicting clerical attitudes to eating and drinking, viewed as a necessary evil for human survival on the one hand and, on the other, their increasing recognition of the usefulness of communal feasts for extending their power and authority. Authority is also at the heart of the fourth topic, the conflict between medical practice based on ancient dietetics and christian conceptions of health and sickness. Food and drink played an important part in treating illness and maintaining health in ancient dietetic medicine which urged a diet suited to the constitution of the individual in order to maintain the proper equilibrium in the body, while christian advice to the sick

urged fasting, prayer, and reliance on miracle working saints. In the final part of the book, archaeological evidence is brought to bear on the hard-to-extinguish custom of funerary feasting and the sending of food presents with the buried dead.

Each one of the topics treated in the book is worthy of intensive study and is of interest to scholars of the later Roman empire and the early Middle Ages. The problems, however, that researchers encounter when dealing with these topics in this period are serious, well set out by the author in her "Acknowledgments" (p. xvii), and reiterated in the "Introduction" (p. 3) and in several other places. These problems arise from the meager written sources that would testify to the way of life in Gaul in the centuries following the collapse of Roman imperial administration. What writing survives from this age reflects the views and agenda of a narrow special interest group, who were heavily involved in christianizing the population and thus spreading its influence and gaining power. Laws promulgated, decisions of church councils, sermons, and saints' lives were all written by men in power, expressing a Christian agenda and perspective. There are no literary sources to testify to the life of the non-Christian population; as a matter of fact, there is precious little that would throw light on the way of life and thoughts even of the converted that could be of use as a counterweight to the Christianizing propaganda, as the author herself clearly admits. There is, however, an increasing accumulation of archaeological evidence that may provide the historian with material evidence that would help to evaluate the literary sources.

In this work, the author makes use of both written and archaeological evidence. She acknowledges the fact that the two types of source often contradict each other. However, when this happens speculations based on some very questionable assumptions are brought to bear. The most problematic of these is the claim that by the Merovingian age (which keeps sliding back and forth between the fourth and the eighth centuries, or anywhere in between these) the population of Gaul was Christian or at least baptized into the faith. Effros insists on maintaining this view in face of the sizable evidence that she herself reports to the contrary. Clerical writing, repeated laws, and other written evidence with the unambiguous purpose of suppressing pagans and extirpating or at least curtailing their influence, all are abundant through this whole period. Why legislate or fulminate if the problem ceased to exist or was negligible?

This unsupported assumption leads her discussion of funerary banquets and of the common archaeological finding of food gifts deposited with the dead in the grave into considerable difficulties. In order to explain that while the people who put food in the graves of their dear departed did not do it for the same reason as pagans, she has to appeal to concepts such as "status" and "gift-exchange" to argue that they "performed such ceremonies at least in part to display their elite identity in the same way in which they utilized grave goods as a form of symbolic expression" (p. 89). How depositing food and drink in the grave would "heighten the status or define the identity" of individuals or groups in the absence of a belief that one is doing something good for the dead is difficult to fathom, although the author argues strongly for it, saying that "food and drink deposits resulted neither from the survival of actual pagan cults nor from belief in the consumption of these offerings by the dead" (p. 85). It is extremely difficult to know what some of our own best friends believe, even though they talk with us. To get into the head of long dead people who did not even leave us their names, let alone their intentions or beliefs, is impossible. All we can do is to conjecture, but this has to be based on evidence. The evidence in this case is that since some people went to some pains to feed their dead relations, it stands to reason that they had some belief that would explain their action. As Effros herself documents, giving food to others, that is, to the living, could be used to enhance one's status (even one's masculinity! p. 29); if the motive for giving food to the dead was indeed this putative need for status, one would think that giving it to the living would have been a better way to achieve it.

Another problem that this book raises is that of the use of saints' lives as historical sources. The author is well aware of the fact that these stories were written by clerical authors, who aimed to put up, mostly

unachievable, ideals of Christian behavior. From the time the genre was born, in the middle of the fourth century, its purpose was propaganda, the instilling of guilt and shame into the minds of comfortable, complaisant, or rich Christians, as one of the genre's more successful proponents, Jerome, clearly indicates in his life of Paul the First Hermit, where he threatens his readers with eternal hell fire while Paul the Hermit will enjoy heaven! Now just as it is difficult to believe that the devout hermit was buried in the Egyptian desert by two weeping lions, it is equally difficult to take at face value these tales of championship fasting and other self-imposed superhuman privations. Effros uses these stories in a laudable attempt to rescue women of this period from powerless oblivion. She uses hagiography to illustrate that heroic self-starvation while giving food to others earned some women power and authority. Since most often this "power" and "authority" was attributed to the holy, self-starved women posthumously by a later writer with his own agenda, one may wonder whether the price was worth it!

There may indeed be some information to be gleaned from some of these tales that would be useful for historians, but the controls for these have to be clearly established and distinctions clearly drawn between what is taken as fact and what is fancy.

What the book so amply illustrates is the concerted effort on the part of the Christian authorities to suppress the ancient religion rooted in a way of life. The most satisfying aspects of this way of life were very hard to change. Eating and drinking together and having many holidays gave color and enjoyment to life. The apostle Paul in the first century taught that Christians needed no holidays, but by the early middle ages many or all the major pagan festival days were renamed to Christian ones and were still celebrated.

Despite the problems discussed above, the book is a very useful review of the present state of research on the role of food and fasting in the transformation of the ancient world and in the gaining of control by Christian authorities over ever larger areas of human existence. The book would be useful to students interested in the early middle ages, for whom it provides guidance for further research and an extensive bibliography. Readers interested in the late Roman world may perhaps find its treatment of this world rather schematic and not very informative.

NOTES

[1] K. F. Kipple and K. C. Ornelas, *The Cambridge World History of Food*, vol.ii: 1466-1523 (Cambridge, 2000); P. Pray Bober, *Art, Culture and Cuisine* (Chicago, 1999), 1-26; V. E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, the Evolution of a Sin* (London, 1996)1-14; P. Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1999), 1-28.

Veronika Grimm
Yale University
veronika.grimm@yale.edu

See also Bonnie Effros' response to this review.

Copyright © 2003 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172