Breaking Bread:

Socialization and the Ritualization of Power, Prestige, and Social Norms through Food in High Medieval England

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Abstract

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Alexis M. Johnson

Food in high medieval England (1066–1315) was central to socialization. It played a key role in social gatherings, both through fasting and feasting. The thesis examines the symbolic and functional roles of food rituals across lay, ecclesiastical, monastic, noble, and royal groups, highlighting the ways in which food served as a means of socialization and a tool for asserting power, prestige, and social norms. This study relies on a rich combination of primary source materials derived from chronicles, histories, visual sources, monastic rules, collections of recipes, courtesy literature, and administrative and legal sources. The theoretical frameworks established by Ledyaev (1997), Wagner (1996), Durkheim (1912), and Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch Jr. (1980) guide this study. It argues that food, through fasting and feasting, was not merely sustenance but an instrument of socialization.

Keywords: high medieval, England, feasts, fasting, power, prestige, social norm, socialization, monasteries, ecclesiastic, lay, elite, court, manners, Churching, wedding, funeral

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Introduction:

Food production, preparation, and consumption have played an important role in human lives and culture, past and present, including England from the Conquest to the early fourteenth century. This thesis's temporal scope begins with the Norman Conquest of 1066 and concludes just before the onset of the Great Famine, around 1315. This period was selected not only because the Conquest brought significant shifts in political and social structures but also due to its profound impact on culinary and religious practices. In the immediate aftermath of the Conquest, changes in land ownership and agricultural production influenced the availability and variety of foodstuffs.[1] The introduction of new cultural and religious norms also reshaped practices of fasting and feasting. Additionally, during the Great Famine, widespread crop failures and a dramatic decline in agricultural productivity drastically reduced the availability and diversity of foodstuffs, while the ensuing economic hardships and social disruptions reconfigured long-established practices of fasting and feasting.[2]

This thesis argues that food and food rituals in the high medieval period were not merely about sustenance but served as an instrument of socialization, asserting power, prestige, and social norms across society. Elaborate feasts showcased opulence and served as deliberate displays of power and prestige, with the distribution and presentation of food underscoring the host's dominance over their guests. In contrast, fasting periods were highly ritualistic observances marked by a strict abstinence from the rich and indulgent foods typically enjoyed at feasts. These

[1] For detailed information on these changes, see Oliver Creighton and Stephen Rippon, "Conquest, Colonisation and the Countryside: Archaeology and the Mid-11th- to Mid-12th-Century Rural Landscape," in *The Archaeology of the 11th Century: Continuities and Transformations*, 1st ed., ed. Dawn M. Hadley and Christopher Dyer (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

[2] See Ian Kershaw, "The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in England 1315–1322," *Past & Present*, no. 59 (1973): 3–50.

fasts underscored moral fortitude, spiritual discipline, and a commitment to religious norms, thereby reinforcing a parallel social order based on self-control and piety. Together, the cyclical interplay of feasting and fasting created a balanced framework in medieval society. Feasts and other forms of commensality not only provided nourishment but also facilitated social interactions and visibly affirmed hierarchical structures, while fasting underscored communal discipline and adherence to enduring traditions. This dual approach to food consumption was essential in shaping and perpetuating the cultural and social fabric of the time.

Socialization—the process by which individuals internalize social and societal ideas and norms—is the key concept driving this thesis.[3] Family, community, religion, peer groups, economic systems, legal systems, and penal systems are all agents of socialization, deeply influencing a person's life.[4] Of the various forms of socialization, anticipatory,[5] peer,[6] and religious[7] socialization played the most significant roles in medieval English life.

The thesis draws closely on the theoretical framework established by Valeri G. Ledyaev in his book, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis*. He proposes that power, whether political or non-political, can be divided into six forms: authority, manipulation, persuasion, inducement, coercion,

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[3] Zina O'Leary, *The Social Science Jargon Buster: The Key Terms You Need to Know* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007), 266.

[4] Teal Rothschild, *Rothschild's Introduction to Sociology: An Adaptation of OpenStax College's Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd ed. (Houston: OpenStax, 2015), 100-103,

[5] As we age, our roles in society evolve. Just as children engage in imaginative play by pretending to be doctors or playing house, adults also prepare for future roles through a process known as anticipatory socialization. Rothschild, *Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd ed., 106.

[6] Peer group socialization starts early in life and continues as children grow. During adolescence, peer groups gain added significance as they help individuals form distinct identities and assert their independence from their parents. Moreover, because children typically participate in different activities with friends than they do with family, these groups offer unique opportunities for social learning and become the first major setting for social experiences outside the home. Rothschild, *Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd ed., 101.

[7] Much like other institutions, these settings teach members how to engage with the tangible aspects of their faith. For many individuals, key family events such as weddings and births are closely tied to religious celebrations, and many religious organizations play a role in reinforcing traditional gender roles through socialization. Rothschild, *Introduction to Sociology*, 2nd ed., 103.

and force.[8] Feasts and fasts, and the food presented and consumed at them, can be understood as expressions of persuasive, inductive, and authoritative power. Ledyaev argues that persuasive power arises when the powerholder is able to use arguments to influence the subject to do something they would not otherwise have done without the imposition of explicit sanctions.[9] Inductive power stems from the powerholder's ability to offer goods or services that the subject desires, overcoming resistance by promising rewards.[10] Authoritative power, meanwhile, is derived from a powerholder's characteristics that compel the subject to follow commands irrespective of their content.[11]

Foodstuff in medieval England, whether celebrated in lavish feasts or observed in periods of fasting, was central to the expression of power in its many forms. Feasts, with their opulent displays of abundance and conviviality, functioned as a symbolic manifestation of persuasive power, wherein hosts strategically employed grandeur to influence attendees—while the contrasting austerity of fasting represented not only deliberate restraint but also a form of social and spiritual performance that could inspire or pressure others to conform. In this sense, fasting carried its own persuasive weight, reinforced by religious sanction and the promise of communal or divine reward, making it a more complex mechanism of influence than mere personal choice. A feast signified inductive power through the rich array of available foodstuff, inviting consumption as a sign of communal participation, whereas fasting exhibited a power of denial that subtly induced reflection and self-discipline. Additionally, feasts embodied authoritative power through their visual and physical demonstration of a host's domination over the social situation, with the stark juxtaposition of indulgence and fasting revealing the host's capacity to control both

[8] Valeri Ledyaev, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis* (Commack: Nova Science Publishers, 1998), 223.
[9] Ledyaev, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis*, 223-224.
[10] Ledyaev, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis*, 223.
[11] Ledyaev, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis*, 224.

abundance and abstinence. In these ways, both feasting and fasting reflected, in numerous ways, the host's broader power within medieval society.

Philip L. Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis complements Ledyaev's theory by emphasizing the links between power and social status, prestige, and display. Wagner argues that acts of display and the human desire to "show off" often outweigh rational considerations.[12] This theory applies directly to medieval feasts and fasts, where food was a status symbol and tool of socialization. Individuals often overspent, preparing extravagant dishes or paying for necessary substitutions not for taste or practicality but as marks of social prestige. The extravagant display of feasting reinforced social hierarchies and power dynamics, just as fasting, through its visible restraint and piety, could also serve as a form of social display that communicated status, virtue, and adherence to communal norms. By combining Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis with Ledyaev's theory of power, the thesis examines the function of foodstuffs as a tool for the interplay of socialization and status display.

Ledyaev and Wagner's arguments are further enhanced by the "expectation states" concept proposed by Joseph Berger, Susan J. Rosenholtz, and Morris Zelditch, Jr., in *Status Organizing Processes*. They suggest that people's perceptions of one another influence their interactions, leading to observable differences in social treatment and inequality.[13] If someone perceives another to have certain qualities or characteristics, it can affect the way they interact with them, potentially creating observable differences or inequalities in the treatment of individuals and groups. The literature, art, and architecture of the elite acted as "social objects" that reflected social prestige

[12] Philip L. Wagner, *Showing Off: The Geltung Hypothesis* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 12.
[13] Joseph Berger, Susan J. Rosenholtz and Morris Zelditch, Jr., "Status Organizing Processes," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 6 (1980), 481.

and helped to shape reality.[14] In the context of feasts and fasts, the ability to host such events or source foodstuff appropriate for fasts, was a direct representation of power, offering opportunities to garner social prestige with food acting as a social object.

Émile Durkheim's theory of collective representations adds another layer of understanding. He argues that collective representations are images or symbols that convey values, ideologies, or ideas of a group because they have a common significance for members of a given society. [15] Durkheim emphasizes that "collective representations are the result of an immense co-operation, which stretches not only into space but into time as well."[16] Over time, these representations become embedded within larger structures of authority, gaining societal backing that compels individuals to adopt actions and ideas that may be unpleasant.[17] Therefore, collective representations have the power to exert force over members of a society to maintain a set standard of behavior and act as a "controlling mechanism."[18]

Foodstuff in medieval England, whether showcased in opulent feasts or deliberately limited during fasting periods, served as a potent symbol that both embodied and reinforced collective values, beliefs, and social structures. In this period, foodstuffs carried deep social significance beyond their practical function. Spices, for example, were not simply flavorings; they were a marker of wealth and global connections, reflecting a person's ability to access the expensive spice trade. Venison, as a prized meat associated with hunting, was closely tied to aristocratic privilege

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[14] Berger, Rosenholtz and Zelditch, Jr., "Status Organizing Processes," 481.

[15] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2008), 16-18.

[16] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 16.

[17] W. S. F. Pickering, *Durkheim and Representations* (London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

[18] Pickering, *Durkheim and representations*, 16.

and royal favor.[19] Fish was associated with religious abstention from meat during fasting periods.[20] Even bread carried symbolic meaning—fine white bread was reserved for the wealthy, while coarse rye bread was eaten by the poor.[21]

Thus, every dish functioned as a multilayered symbol, communicating messages about a person's status, wealth, and social connections. These meanings were widely understood by every member of society, allowing moments of fast and feast to serve as platforms where social hierarchies were both displayed and reinforced. Through the lens of Durkheim's collective representations theory, fasts and feasts acted as mechanisms of social control. Attendees, aware of the symbolic weight ascribed to the food, would conform to the social expectations that accompanied these symbols. Participants, by showcasing their wealth and authority through their engagement with foodstuff, subtly reaffirmed their place in the social order. In this way, fasts and feasts not only reflected but actively contributed to the perpetuation of social norms and power dynamics in medieval England, ensuring that the social roles and hierarchies were both visible and respected.

The theoretical underpinnings outlined above—Ledyaev's forms of power, Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis, expectation states theory, and Durkheim's theory of collective representations—are helpful in analyzing medieval fasts and feasts as arenas of social power and prestige. These concepts resonate with existing scholarship that has explored feasts as mechanisms for social control, status display, and reinforcement of hierarchies.

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[19] Under the law, peasants were not allowed to hunt large animals. Laypeople earning less than 40 shillings (£2) a year or priests with incomes under 10 shillings annually were prohibited from owning hunting dogs. In addition, they could not use any hunting devices to capture or kill deer, hares, conies, or other game reserved for the elite. Anyone caught violating these rules faced a one-year prison sentence. Peter Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2005), 17.

[20] Melitta Weiss Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 39.

[21] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 3.

Before food history emerged as a distinct subfield, William Mead's *The English Medieval Feast* (1931) introduced a line of thinking that reshaped how historians approached food and eating. Mead highlights the role of feasts in maintaining and reinforcing social hierarchies, arguing that they were not merely displays of wealth but also crucial in shaping social and political relationships.[22] His work offers key insights into the performative nature of feasting, particularly the expectation that hosts outdo one another to uphold their social status. Mead's analysis of feasts as opportunities for elite trendsetting and social mobility informs this thesis's broader argument that fasting and feasting played a central role in reinforcing social norms, particularly in the distribution of power and prestige.

Mead's work predates the discipline of food history, which emerged as a distinct sub-field of study in the 1970s. By the early 1980s, it had established itself, driven by a desire to go beyond culinary history.[23] While culinary historians focus on recipes, food historians examine food as a key aspect of social history through social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors.[24] Many historians have made significant contributions to our understanding of medieval feasting practices, food culture, and the social dynamics that accompanied them. They have addressed how food shaped both individual identity and broader social structures in medieval England, particularly

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[22] See chapter "Serving the Feast," William Edward Mead, *The English Medieval Feast* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967).

[23] Raymond Sokolov, "Many Hands Stirring Many Pots," in *Natural History* 109, no. 9 (2000): 86.

[24] Christopher Conrad, "Social History," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Pergamon, 2001), 14299. Social history arose as a historical approach, or subdiscipline, focusing on society. Numerous historians have shifted toward viewing food through a cultural lens, rather than merely treating recipes and other food-related sources at face value. See Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), for discussions on the interplay between food and religion; Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), for further exploration of how food influenced religious practices; Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1985), for insights into medieval cookery and its societal impact, including how the poor emulated the rich; Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), for a discussion of the role of food in charitable practices, especially surrounding funerals.

how food-related practices, from preparation to consumption, intersected with issues of power, prestige, and social norms, all of which are critical to the analysis of medieval fasts and feasts in this thesis. This thesis aims to contribute to the existing historiography by positioning fasting and feasting within the broader context of power and socialization in medieval England.

Bridget Ann Henisch's *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (1976) picked up where Mead left off and set the stage for future research into medieval eating. By exploring the pressures exerted on medieval individuals by religious, social, and financial factors concerning food, she was able to illustrate how influential food was to medieval society.[25] Her analysis focuses on how these pressures shaped the preparation and presentation of food, showing that the act of feasting was not just about the consumption of food but also about the broader societal implications of those meals.[26] This idea—that societal expectations surrounding food begin long before it reaches the table—resonates throughout the subsequent historiography and provides a foundation for understanding how feasting both reflected and reinforced social hierarchies. In her later work, *The Medieval Cook* (2009), Henisch shifts her focus to the often-overlooked figure of the cook, using depictions from illuminated manuscripts to examine their social status.[27] By doing so, she highlights the paradox of cooks being both essential and marginalized in the context of medieval society.[28] Henisch's research broke new ground by situating food workers within broader discussions about social prestige, emphasizing the complex relationship between the material and

[25] Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*, 14-15.
[26] Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*, 15.
[27] Bridget Ann Henisch, *The Medieval Cook* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 62.
[28] Medieval cooks faced a double risk: whether their exceptional talent or lack of it, they were always thought to be in league with dark forces. Moralists argued that the most skilled chefs were sent by the Devil, while others claimed the Devil cared for the unskilled ones. gluttony being dangerous on its own no one needed extra warning. Masterful cooks only made matters worse by drawing their contented diners further into temptation, transforming plain ingredients into irresistible delights. However, at the same time, cooks and their skills were celebrated for their ability to create delicious food that sustained both the body and spirit. Henisch, *The Medieval Cook*, 1.

cultural aspects of food. This focus on the social positioning of food workers is relevant to the thesis, as it aligns with the broader themes of social hierarchy, power dynamics, and the role of feasting in medieval life that underpin the analysis of medieval feasts. By exploring the contribution of cooks, like other marginalized groups, to the performance of prestige at feasts, Henisch's work helps illuminate the intersection of food preparation, service, and societal structures, offering an additional lens through which to understand the power relations inherent in these events.

Building on Henisch's foundation, other scholars have deepened the discussion of food as a central cultural and social marker in medieval life. Stephen Mennell's *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1996) traces the evolution of food from the medieval period to the present, but his analysis of medieval food culture is especially important for its focus on taste and social standing.[29] Mennell asserts that food was a key marker of identity, and changes in taste often mirrored larger social and cultural shifts.[30] Mennell's study of the evolution of eating and taste in England and France utilizes Elias' 'figurational' or 'sociogenetic' approach to cooking and eating.[31] Much like Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis, the figurational approach focuses on competition between groups as a means to assert

[29] Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 60.

[30] See chapter "Introduction," Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*.

[31] Figurational sociology primarily focuses on developmental processes. The term "figuration" describes the patterns of interdependence that tie individuals together within groups, classes, or entire societies—patterns that involve both cooperation and conflict and are rarely fixed. As these social figurations develop, aspects such as individual behavior, cultural preferences, intellectual ideas, social hierarchies, political power, and economic organization become intricately linked, evolving in ways that merit investigation. The goal is to offer a "sociogenetic" explanation detailing how these configurations shift from one form to another, why some are more susceptible to change, and the effects these changes have on people's lives and perceptions. Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 15-16.

power.[32] This aligns with the view that feasts were more than just culinary displays—they were structured performances of power. While his work touches on themes of social prestige and identity, it lacks an in-depth analysis of feasting as a social institution, as other historians, like William Mead, have done more explicitly linking food and feasting to the performance of power and status.

The performative aspect of eating in the high medieval period was further explored by John Gillingham in his article "From Civilitas to Civility: Codes of Manners in Medieval and Early Modern England" (2002). He analyzes the relationship between food, manners, and social identity through courtesy books like the twelfth-century *Liber Urbani*, which offered detailed instructions on how to behave at feasts.[33] He emphasizes that table manners were a critical performance of social status, with the act of feasting becoming an event where the elite displayed their superiority through proper behavior.[34] For those outside the elite, adherence to these manners offered a way to elevate their status, making the feast a central stage for the performance of social roles. His argument that manners were both a reflection of and a means of reinforcing social hierarchies is crucial to understanding how feasts operated as public performances of power. At the feasting table, elites could display their mastery of social norms, while those of lower status could attempt to elevate their own standing by adopting similar behaviors.

Melitta Adamson, in her book, *Food in Medieval Times* (2004), delves more deeply into the relationship between food and power and examines how food practices, including the types of

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[32] Elias sees conflict and competition, or 'contest,' between social groups as a key driver of social and cultural development. These struggles take different forms over time and shape society in diverse ways. Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 16.

[33] John Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility: Codes of Manners in Medieval and Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002): 272.

[34] John Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility," 267.

ingredients used, were dictated by social rank. She highlights the stark contrast between the diets of the wealthy and the poor, illustrating how access to luxury ingredients, such as imported spices or high-quality meats, became a marker of elite status.[35] Her detailed exploration of the cultural associations of different foods provides further insight into how feasts reinforced societal structures, linking specific dishes to power and prestige. Adamson also discusses the symbolic role of food in religious and communal settings, noting that feasts were often orchestrated to reflect both secular and ecclesiastical authority.[36] In addition to the consumption of prestigious ingredients, she underscores the importance of culinary spectacle, where elaborate dishes, such as peacocks re-dressed in their own plumage, reinforced the host's social standing.[37] Adamson's work extends the discussion of feasting beyond mere sustenance, emphasizing its role in ritualized display.

Peter Hammond's *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (2005) likewise examines the relationship between food and power, arguing that the types of food served at a feast were direct reflections of a host's status.[38] Hammond's analysis of medieval feasts highlights how feasts were utilized by the wealthy as a means to display power. He points to luxury items like spices, transported via a sophisticated distribution network, as symbols of wealth and influence, primarily accessible to the elite.[39] Hammond's focus on the distribution network of luxury foodstuffs highlights the lengths to which the elite would go to secure their social standing through feasting,

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[35] Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, xix.

[36] See chapter "Food and Religion," Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*.

[37] Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, 234.

[38] These feasts highlighted the host's wealth and refined taste, reinforcing his elevated position in society. By hosting, he asserted his power and significance, while the guests' attendance confirmed their roles within the social order. This dynamic was underscored by the intricate ceremonies that were an essential part of the event. Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 124.

[39] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 1.

an idea central to this thesis's examination of how medieval elites maintained and showcased their power through conspicuous consumption.

Similarly, Christopher Woolgar's *The Culture of Food in England, 1200-1500* (2016) emphasizes the cultural significance of food beyond its role in sustenance. By utilizing sources like coroner's records and monastic customaries, Woolgar provides a detailed reconstruction of the day-to-day interactions with food in medieval England, highlighting its role in shaping social norms and cultural practices.[40] Woolgar's focus on the role of taste in expressing identity and social standing mirrors Mennell's emphasis on the cultural dimensions of food consumption, though his analysis of feasts is far more detailed in terms of specific social dynamics. Woolgar's focus on the regulation of food consumption, particularly through monastic rules, underscores the structured nature of food and feasting in reinforcing social norms.[41] This theme aligns with the broader argument of this thesis regarding the use of food as a tool of social control and power display.

Together, these works contribute to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between foodstuff rituals, like fasting and feasting, and ideas of power, prestige, and social norms. By examining the diverse ways in which medieval populations engaged with foodstuffs, their authors provide a framework for analyzing the role of fast and feasts as tools of socialization. This thesis builds on these scholarly foundations, arguing that medieval fasts and feasts were not only moments of religious abstention or celebrations of abundance but also complex social events that played a central role in shaping and maintaining medieval society. By situating this analysis within the broader historiography, we can see how medieval foodstuff rituals, as studied by both

[40] Christopher Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England, 1200-1500* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 5.

[41] See chapter "Foodways and Monastic Institutions," in Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England.*

contemporary historians and through the lens of sociological theory, functioned to communicate and maintain social hierarchies.

This thesis makes a unique contribution to the study of food in medieval England, both through its examination of socialization and power dynamics and by its specific focus on the high medieval period. Notably, no historians have yet analyzed commensality explicitly as a tool for socialization. While several scholars have documented the connection between food and social status, this work extends the discussion by discussing how food practices actively constructed, contested, and redefined power dynamics within medieval society. The focus of this thesis on the high medieval period is likewise important. Most historians of English food examine a broad time period, focusing especially on the later medieval period or occasionally the Anglo-Saxon period. Few have focused specifically on the high medieval period as this thesis does. In doing so, this thesis will highlight a roughly 250-year era that differed markedly from the late medieval period due to the profound impacts of the Great Famine and the plague on medieval society.[42] Additionally, this thesis seeks to fill this gap by demonstrating that, in high medieval England, food played a crucial role in socialization across different social groups. By applying the theoretical frameworks of Ledyaev, Wagner, Berger et al., and Durkheim to evidence of fasting and feasting, the thesis will uncover the broader social implications of these practices. Ultimately, the thesis aims to highlight how food shaped social interactions and influenced medieval society at large.

The thesis draws on a wide variety of evidence to show food customs. Chronicles, histories, and other narrative sources that offer more fulsome accounts of various feasts and social

[42] See Rosemary Horrox and W. M. Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

engagement with food and eating are particularly important. Such sources shed light on the political importance of these gatherings, where food was used to display power, reward loyalty, and negotiate alliances.[43] Monastic rules supplement chronicles in outlining monastic practices relating to eating, which influenced broader high medieval attitudes toward fasting and feasting, Such texts allow the thesis to explore how Christian doctrine shaped both the practice of and attitudes toward communal meals, highlighting the tension between the pious rejection of excess and the celebration of divine abundance through feasting.[44] Courtesy literature provides insight into the numerous rules of etiquette that individuals participating in a feast would have been subject to. As such, it provides an understanding of the rigid framework social interactions occurred in and how the navigation of these rules could lead to the garnering or loss of power and prestige.[45]

Administrative and legal sources will be utilized in the thesis as they provide critical insights into the legal and administrative frameworks surrounding medieval feasting practices, highlighting the intersection of food, law, and social obligation. These documents illuminate the institutionalization of feasting in the legal fabric of medieval society and its link to vassalage, hospitality, and religious patronage. Legal texts offer a glimpse into the regulatory aspect of feasts, governing such matters as who could host such events and what provisions were expected for both hosts and guests. Legal documents also illustrate the role of feasting in formal agreements and contracts, demonstrating how food and hospitality helped cement social bonds, legitimize

[43] One example is Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vols. 1–7, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman, 1872–1883).

[44] Benedict of Nursia (Saint), *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Francis Aidan Gasquet (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909; repr., New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966) provides a representative example of this group of sources.

[45] For example, see Daniel of Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus, Atque de Vetustate Monachorum: Ex Codicibus Manuscriptis, et Auctorum Scriptis*, ed. J. Gilbart Smyly (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co.; Longman, Green, & Co., 1939), accessed September 6, 2024, https://archive.org/details/urbanus-magnus/mode/2up?q=Forte+sedens+banco.

authority, and uphold traditions. Using these sources, one can construct a richly detailed exploration of how food and feasting operated as tools of socialization and served as platforms for displays and reinforcement of power, prestige, and social norms in high medieval society.[46]

Collections of recipes serve as essential sources for understanding the specific foods prepared for medieval feasts and their symbolic meanings. These collections offer recipes that were designed for lavish banquets, including those associated with religious festivals and courtly gatherings, illustrating how food was used to convey rank and social prestige. Although culinary manuscripts catered only to the rich, they offer a foundation for understanding the culinary practices that underpin medieval feasting culture. Combined with other primary sources, they allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between food, power, and social identity in medieval England.[47] Visual sources, such as manuscript illuminations, were also utilized. By incorporating visual sources alongside textual evidence, the thesis captures the performative aspects of medieval feasting and how they shaped perceptions of status in social situations.[48]

While this thesis draws on a range of primary sources, these are used primarily in an illustrative rather than exhaustive evidentiary capacity. The aim was not to compile a comprehensive catalogue of medieval references to food, feasting, or fasting, but rather to select representative examples that illuminate key aspects of the theoretical frameworks applied. Sources such as chronicles, visual materials, and monastic rules were chosen for their ability to exemplify broader patterns of socialization through food rituals. These sources serve to illustrate that

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[46] See, for example, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem and Other Analogous Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office*, vols. 1–26 (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1904–1966).

[47] As an example, see Constance B. Hieatt and Robin F. Jones, "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections Edited from British Library Manuscripts Additional 32085 and Royal 12.C.Xii," *Speculum* 61, no. 4 (1986): 859–82.

[48] For example, see *Dispute over Incest*, Index of Medieval Art, Parker Library, MS 10, fol. 326v, accessed September 27, 2024, https://theindex.princeton.edu/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=17F722A4-006F-449F-95C0-CD95CDC48300.

sociological theories can enrich our understanding of the social functions of food in high medieval England. The study was limited to sources available in either Latin or modern English. As a result, texts preserved exclusively in other medieval vernaculars, such as Anglo-Norman or Middle English, were not included in the analysis. The translations from Latin presented in the thesis are those of the author.[49]

Institutional and library access limitations did not permit the thesis to engage directly with certain recent editions of primary sources and major works of modern scholarship relevant to the study of medieval food and social structures. While these texts could not be consulted in full, they are acknowledged throughout the thesis where appropriate. In instances where more recent scholarship is known to exist but could not be used, this thesis notes its relevance in the context of its analysis, often based on older but still valuable sources. This approach ensures that the thesis remains in dialogue with the broader field, even if it cannot claim comprehensive coverage of all relevant literature.

The thesis draws on a range of sources, and alongside descriptions of grand feasts, it also deals with descriptions of everyday meals in elite households. While these two are not synonymous, they share important social functions—most notably, the principle of commensality, or the act of eating together. In medieval society, dinner (Latin: *prandium*) was the principal daily meal, served at midday and frequently used to host guests, display order and hierarchy, and structure the day's routines.[50] Supper (*cena*), eaten later in the day, was lighter and generally

[49] The author employed a multi-faceted approach to ensure the accuracy and reliability of source translations, including consulting online dictionaries, grammatical tools, and translation aids, and incorporating materials generously provided by Bob Taylor-Vaisey, former president of the Peterborough Historical Society and Trent University alumnus, whose doctoral research focused on medieval childhood.

[50] Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*, 22. Additional thanks to historian Martha Carlin for this information.

offered to those remaining overnight.[51] By contrast, feasts were exceptional occasions, often aligned with religious festivals, seasonal celebrations, or important life events. They were marked by elaborate service, abundant food, and heightened symbolism, acting as staged performances of status and solidarity. However, this thesis also uses the term "feasting" in a broader sense, to describe not only formal festal events but also the act of eating richly or ceremoniously, especially when such meals are served to reinforce social roles and shared values.

In both senses, dinners and feasts were moments of socialization. Whether embedded in the daily rhythm of aristocratic households or set apart as spectacular occasions, shared meals functioned as rituals that transmitted cultural norms, affirmed social bonds, and articulated power structures. By treating both in the analytical frame of food-based socialization, this work aims to show that even routine meals carried meaning, and that the line between everyday and extraordinary was often blurred in practice, though not in terminology.

Chapter One of the thesis examines the explicitly religious practice of fasting and feasting among monastic, ecclesiastic, and lay populations. It begins with an analysis of the impact of the Norman Conquest and continental reform movements on English monasteries, with a focus on food culture. It then looks at the practice of fasting, with special reference to Benedictine, Cistercian, and Carthusian communities, before shifting to the fasting practices of ecclesiastic and lay populations. The chapter then shifts to a discussion of the feasting practices of monastic communities before examining how ecclesiastic and lay populations feasted on major Christian holidays. The discussion of fasting and feasting connects the practices to wider socialization in medieval society through their connections to displays of power, prestige, and social norms.

[51] Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society*, 22. Additional thanks to historian Martha Carlin for this information.

Additionally, the chapter demonstrates how individuals from three different social groups are socialized through their participation in religious food rituals through displays of power, social prestige, and the reinforcement of social norms.

Chapter Two analyzes feasts and dinners held in the royal court. The chapter begins with discussing the rise of courtly culture in the high medieval period and how that influenced socialization. It then shifts to examining the significance of the foodstuff served at royal feasts and dinners and explores connections to power, prestige, and social norms. The chapter then examines how hosts and guests engaged with foodstuff at a feast or dinner through table manners and the structure and operation of a feast and dinner, and how the socialization at these events through this behavior was connected to power, prestige, and social norms.

Chapter Three focuses on feasts associated with major life milestones, such as birth, marriage, and death. The discussion of wedding feasts emphasizes displays of wealth through the types and quantities of food served. The section on churching feasts centers on displays of wealth, their role in confirming inheritance, and the complex social interactions at these events. The discussion of funeral feasts emphasizes charity and displays of wealth through the types and quantities of food served. Each type of feast is linked to broader ideas of power, prestige, and social norms.

The conclusion summarizes the role of food as a key tool of socialization, emphasizing the ways in which feasts in all sectors of society, despite contextual differences, were used to demonstrate and assert power, prestige, and social norms. It also suggests further areas for study related to the thesis topic.

Chapter One:

Religion and Feasting: Faith on the Table

In high medieval Christian society, religion was central to everyday life, shaping how people interacted and influencing their habits. Religion not only dictated spiritual practices but also the cycles of fasting and feasting that were integral to social life, not just as rituals of sustenance, but as key mechanisms for reinforcing power, prestige, and societal norms. In monasteries, communities had to juggle the religious obligation of fasting and hospitality. In ecclesiastic and lay society, during both periods of fasting and feasting individuals showcased their power and prestige through the numerous social norms and expectations associated with medieval dining habits. In this way, religion became inextricably linked to the socialization processes embedded in fasting and feasting. Religious socialization is evident in how individuals learned to engage with food as a material culture of religion, with fasting and feasting both deeply connected to Christian ideology and celebrations. Peer socialization occurred during the communal aspects of fasting and feasting, where individuals from various social ranks participated in shared traditions and values, learning from one another through collective experiences of both abstention and excess. The practice of fasting and feasting also embodied anticipatory socialization, as participants rehearsed and internalized the behaviors expected of their future societal roles as 'good' Christians, through the rituals and customs associated with fasting and feasting. Together, these forms of socialization—religious, peer, and anticipatory—intersected during times of fasting and feasting to uphold and reaffirm the social hierarchy. By participating in these rituals, individuals not only asserted their power and social prestige but also reinforced the norms and values that sustained the broader societal and religious order.

The Norman conquest of England in 1066 ushered in significant change for the population. One of these substantial changes was to the church, as the Normans appointed archbishops from the continent, most notably Lanfranc and Anselm, who brought with them continental ideals of religious reform. The eleventh-century papal reform movement, led by such figures as Leo IX and Gregory VII, aimed to transform the structure, discipline, and authority of the Catholic Church.[52] These reforms had a profound impact on medieval society, strengthening the papacy's power and redefining the Church's relationship with secular rulers.[53] While the eleventh-century papal reform movement is best known for its attacks on simony, clerical marriage, and lay control of the Church, reformers sought to improve standards in general. They held clerics to high standards of behaviour and improved clerical outreach to the laity.[54] Lanfranc and Anselm promoted high monastic standards as former abbots of reformed monasteries. Under them and their successors, English monastic life grew much stricter, and Christian festivals and fasts were more carefully observed, shaping not only religious communities but also influencing lay society.

A key aspect of the reforms was the enforcement of stricter monastic discipline, leading to more rigorous observance of fasts, to improve the moral conduct of the clergy. Archbishop Lanfranc brought with him a large group of continental monks from reformed monasteries, who gradually became the abbots of the major monasteries of England, enforcing Benedictine monasticism supplemented by stricter continental customs.[55] Their efforts revitalized monastic life in England.[56] The *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which now governed monastic life, emphasized

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[52] Timothy Baker, *The Normans* (London: Cassell, 1966), 188.

[53] Baker, *The Normans*, 188.

[54] John Howe, "The Nobility's Reform of the Medieval Church," *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 2 (April 1988): 317.

[55] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 42; Hugh Lawrence, "The Monastic Revival," *History Today* 36, no. 3 (March 1986): 30.

[56] Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300*, 42.

controlled food consumption as part of spiritual discipline. New, more ascetic religious orders, such as the Cistercians and Carthusians, emerged in the late eleventh century and were brought to England in the twelfth century, placing even greater emphasis on the strict control of food consumption.[57] The Cistercians, founded in 1098, sought to reform monastic life by returning to a stricter observance of the Rule of St. Benedict, including heightened dietary restrictions.[58] Even stricter than both the Cistercians and the older Benedictine communities, the Carthusians, established in the 1080s as a reform movement within Benedictine monasticism, adopted the most extreme fasting practices of any monastic group in medieval England.[59]

Arguably, the culmination of church reform efforts came in 1215 with the Fourth Lateran Council led by Pope Innocent III. The Council addressed numerous issues surrounding the church and religious practices, including many relating to food practices. It formalized transubstantiation, reinforcing the Eucharist's spiritual significance.[60] It also condemned excessive feasting among the clergy. While monks had long observed food restrictions under the *Rule of Benedict*, stricter oversight was placed on clerics to ensure they did not indulge in lavish banquets. Canon 17 expressly condemns the behavior of many religious men, stating, "it is a matter for regret that there are some minor clerics and even prelates who spend half of the night in banqueting and in unlawful gossip, not to mention other abuses."[61] Overall, high medieval church reform movements reinforced food as a tool of religious discipline, affecting both feasting and fasting. By

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[57] See David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of Its Development from the Times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940–1216* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

[58] Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300*, 64.

[59] Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300*, 77.

[60] "Twelfth Ecumenical Council - Lateran IV 1215: The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215," trans. H. J. Schroeder, in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937), 236–296, accessed via Internet Medieval Sourcebook, February 21, 2025, https://origin-rh.web.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp

[61] "Twelfth Ecumenical Council - Lateran IV 1215."

strengthening monastic regulations and influencing lay practices, the reforms contributed to a structured, hierarchical approach to food in medieval society, shaping both daily life and major religious observances.

The transformations brought about by the church reform movements during the high medieval period were felt most acutely within monastic communities, which played a vital role in shaping religious, intellectual, and social life in high medieval England. As centers of spiritual renewal, monasteries became focal points for the implementation of reformist ideals. Central to this discipline were changes to monastic eating patterns, which reflected broader ecclesiastical concerns about bodily control, moral purity, and spiritual devotion. An analysis of the sixth-century Italian *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the most common rule followed in high medieval English monasteries, will allow for an understanding of how monasteries managed fasting practices. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* emphasizes fasting as both a moral and spiritual practice, instructing monks to "love fasting" as part of their religious discipline.[62] This phrase highlights an internalized commitment rather than mere obligation, aligning with the reform movement's focus on inner moral rectitude. The placement of fasting within the Rule, preceding charitable acts like feeding the poor, suggests that self-discipline was considered foundational for monastic virtue and service.[63] Additionally, the instruction "not to be a great eater" reinforces food-related discipline, balancing active self-denial with restraint.[64] Beyond monastic life, Benedictine fasting practices shaped broader Christian society, reinforcing ecclesiastical authority and influencing lay piety, particularly during penitential seasons like Lent. Monastic food control symbolized spiritual authority and separation from worldly indulgence, legitimizing the monastery's role within the

[62] Benedict of Nursia (Saint), *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Francis Aidan Gasquet (London: Chatto and Windus, 1909; repr., New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966). Ch. 4.
[63] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 4.
[64] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 4.

Christian hierarchy. Through fasting, monks internalized Church authority over the body, extending this influence beyond monastic walls.

However, fasting was also seen as a form of punishment. Chapter 30 of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* frames fasting not only as a spiritual ideal but also as a form of discipline and correction. Used as a punishment for younger monks or those who fail to grasp the severity of excommunication, fasting functions as both a tool of control and a means of moral reform.[65] Unlike physical punishment, it directly targets bodily desires, reinforcing the monastic goal of mastering impulses. This dual function aligns with the broader Christian ideal of suffering for God, making fasting both an act of devotion and a means of cultivating humility, obedience, and spiritual purity. In the high medieval period, fasting was central to monastic discipline, offering both spiritual and practical benefits. It served as an act of penance, not only for personal sins but for the community, reinforcing monks' roles as intercessors.[66] Monks saw fasting as a way to imitate Christ's suffering and participate in the long-standing ascetic tradition.[67] Eschatologically, it also promised eternal rewards, accumulating spiritual merit for the afterlife and cleansing the soul for God's grace.[68] Ultimately, fasting was a key mechanism for discipline, devotion, and divine connection in monastic life. Adalbert de Vogüé, a twentieth-century Italian monk, wrote on the rules of Saint Benedict and what fasting meant for monks, stating that "restrictions about food therefore do not aim at protecting a man from an objective stain coming from without, but at purifying his heart, mortifying his desire, and freeing his spirit."[69] Fasting was viewed as multidimensional, it was

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[65] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 30.
[66] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 28.
[67] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 28.
[68] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 28.
[69] Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule of Saint Benedict, a Doctrinal and Spiritual Commentary*, trans. John Baptist Hasbrouck, Monk of Our Lady of Guadalupe Abbey (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 231.

both a reward and a punishment for living a virtuous life and allowed monks to grow closer to God by mastering bodily desires and resisting sin.

Monastic diets were governed by the Rule's emphasis on moderation, communal eating, and abstinence from meat. These eating practices were deeply intertwined with the Church's broader promotion of fasting as a spiritual exercise, reinforcing the separation between the sacred and the profane. The regulation of monastic meals not only symbolized spiritual purity but also distinguished monastic life from that of the laity, where feasting often underscored wealth, power, and social prestige. As monastic communities sought to embody moral rigor, their dietary practices became a model for the wider Church's emphasis on fasting as a means of spiritual fortification and penance.

The rule outlined what a typical monastic diet was meant to look like. Chapter 39 of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* prescribes the quantity and type of food monks should consume, balancing ascetic discipline with physical sustenance. The Rule permits two cooked dishes per meal to accommodate dietary needs while maintaining moderation.[70] A third dish, such as fruit or vegetables, may be added when available, reflecting seasonal flexibility.[71] The rule also outlines the schedule for meals. Chapter 41 of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* establishes a structured timetable for monastic meals, aligning food consumption with natural and liturgical cycles. Mealtimes shifted throughout the year, reflecting the balance between ascetic ideals and practical human needs. During Eastertide (from Easter to Pentecost), monks were permitted two meals a day, symbolizing spiritual renewal and the joy of the Resurrection.[72] However, for the rest of the year only one meal was eaten. In summer, while fasting was observed less strictly due to longer days

[70] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 39.
[71] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 39.
[72] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 41.

and heavier labor, the main meal was often taken at the sixth hour (around noon) to accommodate the heat and physical demands of work.[73] From autumn until Lent, the main meal was delayed until the ninth hour (about 3 p.m.), as a form of self-discipline and bodily denial.[74] On Wednesdays and Fridays, except during Eastertide, fasting was practiced by postponing the meal until later in the day.[75]

The *Rule of Saint Benedict* established a structured approach to fasting, aligning food restrictions with both weekly observances and major periods of religious devotion. As outlined earlier, the fasting year revolved around key periods in the Christian calendar, most notably Lent and Advent. Chapter 49 of the *Rule of St. Benedict* establishes Lent as the paradigm for monastic living, stating that "the mode of a monk's life ought at all times to favor that of Lenten observance."[76] This directive positions Lenten fasting as the gold standard for monastic practice, suggesting that the penitential rigor of Lent should not be confined to a single season but should inform the daily life of monks. By holding Lenten observance as an aspirational model, the Rule frames fasting as a year-round spiritual discipline that reflects broader Christian ideals of self-denial, repentance, and humility. Monks also fasted on Ember Days—seasonal periods of fasting and prayer—and the vigils of major feast days, which heightened the symbolic contrast between the deprivation of fasting and the abundance of feasting.[77]

While fasting was a practice shared across different monastic orders, each order approached it in distinct ways, revealing their unique spiritual priorities and theological

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[73] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 41.
[74] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 41.
[75] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 41.
[76] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 87-88.
[77] Ember Days were part of a quarterly liturgical cycle linked to fasting and penance. Allen J. Frantzen, *Food, Eating and Identity in Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), 246. For an exploration of their origins and importance in medieval religious life, see Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 67.

commitments. On fasting days, Benedictine monks consumed simple fare like bread, vegetables, legumes, and fish, underscoring ideals of humility and bodily restraint.[78] The meat of quadrupeds was expressly forbidden in *Rule of St. Benedict*.[79] Therefore, fish was a central part of the Benedictine diet. Monasteries established fisheries and fishponds, controlling fish production to meet the dietary needs of their communities. One of the earliest references to a monastic fishpond comes from a writ issued by King Henry I between 1115 and 1128, confirming the Benedictine monks of Selby Abbey in Yorkshire held possession of a fishpond that had existed since the abbey's foundation by William I.[80] This writ, likely a royal charter, constituted part of the monastery's endowment, representing the grant of a secular fishpond to the religious house.[81] Monastic orders, notably the Benedictines, played a key role in developing sophisticated fishpond systems to cultivate luxury freshwater fish such as bream, roach, and pike.[82] By the end of the twelfth century, marine fish consumption was widespread in monasteries, reflecting changes in dietary preferences.[83] In addition to meat, animal products such as dairy and eggs were also forbidden on fast days.[84]

Cistercians emphasized a simpler, more austere diet, with their normal meals consisting of monastic dining staples such as vegetables, cereal products, fish, dairy, and honey.[85] Unlike the Benedictines, who maintained moderate fasting rules rooted in communal stability, the Cistercians

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[78] Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, 186.
[79] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 39.
[80] J. Patrick Greene, *Medieval Monasteries* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 124.
[81] Greene, *Medieval Monasteries*, 124.
[82] Christopher Woolgar and Dale Serjeantson, "Fish Consumption in Medieval England," in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 127-128.
[83] Woolgar and Serjeantson, "Fish Consumption in Medieval England," 124.
[84] Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, 641.
[85] Christopher Woolgar, "Meat and Dairy Products in Late Medieval England," in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 97.

viewed strict fasting as a demonstration of spiritual rigor and a rejection of worldly indulgence.[86] Like the Benedictine order, they abstained from meat and animal products during fasting periods. However, during other periods of the year, they kept a more modest diet than that of the Benedictines. For example, during summer their daily meal consisted of only coarse bread, fruit, and uncooked vegetables.[87] While the monks did eat foodstuffs such as fish and dairy, they ate them far less than the Benedictines to adhere more closely to the *Rule of Saint Benedict* and the ideas of the Lenten fast being the paradigm for monastic living, as discussed earlier. This stricter approach not only reinforced internal monastic discipline but also symbolized the broader reformist mission of the Cistercian Order to return to what they believed were the original ideals of Benedictine monasticism.

Even stricter than the Cistercians and Benedictines, the Carthusian Order adopted the most extreme fasting practices of any monastic group in medieval England. The Carthusians emphasized a solitary, contemplative lifestyle, and this ethos was mirrored in their dietary customs. They abstained from meat, animal products, and fish year-round.[88] By abstaining from these foodstuffs, they existed in a perpetual state of fasting. Therefore, while their fasting meals mirrored that of the Cistercians, they had no reprieve from their limited diet. Both their daily and fasting meals consisted of bread, vegetables, and legumes, all of which were considered humble, unadorned foods.[89] This extreme form of self-denial was central to Carthusian identity, reflecting the belief that solitude, silence, and physical deprivation were essential to achieving spiritual enlightenment.[90] The Carthusians' strict adherence to fasting practices distinguished them from

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[86] Woolgar, "Meat and Dairy Products in Late Medieval England," 97.
[87] David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in* England, 641.
[88] Dianne M. Bazell, "Strife among the Table-Fellows: Conflicting Attitudes of Early and Medieval Christians toward the Eating of Meat," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 1 (1997): 84.
[89] Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain*, 166.
[90] G. H. Cook, *English Monasteries in the Middle Ages* (London: Phoenix House, 1961), 205.

other monastic orders and underscored their identity as a community committed to the most extreme form of religious asceticism.

However, fasting could be broken if it was for the well-being of the individual. Chapters 36 and 37 of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* reveal a balance between ascetic discipline and practical compassion, recognizing the limits of human endurance. While fasting was a core monastic practice, sick monks were granted temporary exemptions, including permission to eat meat, to aid recovery.[91] Similarly, the elderly and young were given permanent allowances, such as lighter fasting requirements and adjusted meal times, acknowledging their physical limitations.[92] Chapter 39, as discussed above, also makes mention of the conditional allowance for increased food rations during periods of "great labour."[93] Here, the abbot is granted discretion to increase the community's food allowance if the monks have engaged in physically demanding work. These provisions illustrate the Rule's pragmatic approach to health, ensuring that monastic discipline did not undermine spiritual growth. By embedding flexibility within its fasting regulations, the Rule underscores the Benedictine ideal that physical well-being and spiritual development are interconnected.

Monastic food customs also had a direct impact on charity and poor relief. Leftover food from each meal was to be distributed to the poor waiting at the gates of the monastery.[94] This practice expanded in the twelfth century, and many kitchens prepared more food than was necessary, expecting to distribute the excess to the poor.[95] Since fasting monks consumed simpler

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[91] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 36.
[92] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 37.
[93] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 39.
[94] Andrew Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook: Monks, Food and Fasting in the Middle Ages* (London: Continuum, 2011), 152.
[95] Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook*, 152.

foods, they often redistributed surplus luxury items, like meat and dairy, to the poor.[96] The writings of Jocelin of Brakelond, who became a monk at Bury St Edmunds in 1173, shed light on the charitable distribution of foodstuff practiced by monasteries. His writings offer key insight into the daily operations of a prominent Benedictine abbey and the conduct of Samson of Tottington, elected abbot in 1182.[97] The election of abbot Samson to the leadership of Bury St Edmunds in 1182 provides a critical case study for examining the role of foodstuff, fasting, and charity within monastic structures. Samson insisted that, even though he personally did not eat meat, at least one meat dish had to appear on his table for the purpose of feeding the poor.[98] While a financially negligible amount for the abbey, it showcases the consistent awareness of food charity and its connections to fasting. This redistribution of food functioned as an act of charity and hospitality, reinforcing the role of monasteries as providers of social welfare. By feeding the poor with the surplus produced from their fasting, monks fulfilled their religious duty of almsgiving while also reinforcing their moral superiority within the social hierarchy.[99] Monastic fasting, therefore, played a dual role in medieval society: it symbolized self-restraint and discipline within monastic communities while enabling charitable redistribution to the poor.

A second example of Samson's balanced approach to food provision is found in his reaction to the fall of Jerusalem in 1187. Brakelond recounts, "When he heard the news of the loss of the Holy Cross and the fall of Jerusalem [1187], he began to wear breeches of hair cloth and a hairshirt instead of one made of mixed wool and linen. He also began to abstain from meat and dishes containing meat. He asked, however, for helpings of meat to be brought to him at table, so as to

[96] Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook*, 153.
[97] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway and Jane Sayers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), x.
[98] Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook*, 153.
[99] Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook*, 152.

increase the food given away to the poor."[100] His symbolic gestures of sacrifice communicated moral authority and bolstered his standing as a moral and spiritual leader. However, his request for meat to be brought to him at the table, only to be distributed to the poor, further illustrates his capacity to exercise moral authority through the symbolic manipulation of food. By staging this act of redistribution, Samson reinforced his image as a pious and charitable leader, while also addressing the broader Christian call for penance and solidarity with those suffering abroad. This reflects the expectation states theory, as the public redistribution of food to the poor actively shaped how monks and laypeople perceived his piety, humility, and moral leadership. This approach allowed him to demonstrate humility and piety while ensuring that the abbey's role as a provider of charity remained visible and effective.

For ecclesiastic and lay populations, two meals were taken daily, dinner and supper.[101] A third meal, breakfast, was not an uncommon addition to the two other daily meals, often taken by general laborers, children, or the elderly.[102] The diets of poor peasants consisted of foodstuffs like grain, fruits, vegetables, and, if they were fortunate, dairy products and meat on occasion.[103] Their diets were supplemented by foodstuffs grown in gardens, scavenged, or poached.[104] As wealth and status increased, individuals could access more foodstuffs and a wider variety. Well-off peasants and the wealthy had access to better quality grain in the form of white bread and had the option to eat meat regularly and, in turn, switch to fish on fast days.[105]

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[100] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, 36.
[101] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 22.
[102] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 22-24.
[103] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 25.
[104] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 35.
[105] C Dyer, "Seasonal Patterns in Food Consumption in the Later Middles Ages," in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 211. See the chapter "Food of the Town Dweller" for a list of foodstuffs that became available in Peter Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 38-57.

For lay people, on fast days, which followed the monastic pattern outlined earlier, changes to diet varied. Those who were very young, old, sick, or poor were excused from fasting practices owing to health concerns.[106] However, the rest of society would be expected to participate in fasting practices. For most members of society, normal fast days were no different than any other; often the amount eaten was not even reduced.[107] The central expectation of people fasting was to abstain from meat and animal products.[108] For the poor, meat and other animal products were not a normal part of their diet. As such, fast days were no different than any other day for poorer populations. However, for the better off, the lack of meat at mealtimes was felt, and, as a result, people consumed fish instead. Fasting would have had more meaning to the wealthy. While the average fast looked different between groups, there were some similarities. During major fasts, such as Lent, when individuals were expected to reduce their number of meals to one a day, both the rich and poor participated in the reduction.[109]

The economic implications of fasting were also significant. With both monks and lay populations abstaining from meat and dairy for considerable periods, the demand for fish and vegetable-based foods increased.[110] The consumption of fish and the establishment of fishponds played an increasingly significant role not only in monastic life but also in broader society in post-conquest England. The twelfth century saw significant investment in pond construction, as seen in royal manors and ecclesiastical estates like those of the Bishops of Winchester, who maintained

[106] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 30.
[107] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 30-31.
[108] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 32-33.
[109] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 31.
[110] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 35.

ponds covering 400 acres.[111] The ability to consume fish during fast periods symbolized social prestige and economic power, with some ponds serving commercial purposes.[112]

The rise of the herring trade, driven by the high demand for salted fish during fasting periods, further demonstrates the wider economic impact of fasting customs.[113] Free access to fish in rivers and streams during the high medieval period became highly controlled, as competition for fish grew. In 1215 the Magna Carta declared that "henceforth all fish-weirs shall be cleared completely from the Thames and the Medway and throughout all England, except along the sea coast."[114] Additional laws were continually made over the next few centuries that prohibited the construction of weirs (fish traps) without a license, as the existence of too many could dangerously deplete fish stocks.[115] Ignoring these laws, the English population continued the illegal use of weirs. It became so common that at times navigation of rivers became nearly impossible due to their overwhelming numbers.[116] Shellfish were also popular, specifically for peasants living along the coast, as they were permitted on fast days, easy to collect, and unlike fishing were not controlled.[117] Oyster shells feature prominently in archeological records, and evidence suggests that oysters, among other shellfish, were collected on a commercial scale by as early as the end of the tenth century. [118]

The household records of Richard de Swinfield, Bishop of Hereford, reflect the demand for fish. The day before Christmas in 1289, a fast day, saw great quantities of numerous kinds of

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[111] Woolgar and Serjeantson, "Fish Consumption in Medieval England," 124.
[112] Woolgar and Serjeantson, "Fish Consumption in Medieval England," 128.
[113] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 35.
[114] "Magna Carta 1225," The National Archives, accessed December 20, 2024, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/magna-carta/magna-carta-1225-westminster/
[115] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 22.
[116] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 22.
[117] Shellfish, particularly for coastal peasants, represented a practical and accessible food source during fasting periods, reflecting both dietary needs and socio-economic conditions. Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*, 44.
[118] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 21.

seafood such as salmon, conger eels, herrings, and codlings purchased, totaling 5s. 8d.[119] Records indicate at least 15 guests were present for this fast meal.[120] While these expenses and the acquisition of seafood were expected for this occasion, the acquisition of seafood outside normal fasting periods could cause issues for the household. The household records of 1289-1290 indicate that during November and December a few members of the household fasted one extra day a week.[121] As a result, fish had to be specially ordered for them weekly.[122]

In examining the fasting practices of the high medieval period, Émile Durkheim's theory of collective representations can be applied to understand how these religious and social rituals reinforced social cohesion and hierarchical control. Durkheim argues that collective representations are images or symbols that convey values, ideologies, or ideas of a group because they have a common significance for a society's members.[123] Fasting is a symbolic absence of food, which reflects deeply held societal ideologies as discussed above. His argument that collective representations arise from extensive cooperation that spans both time and space and time is applicable when examining fasting practices.[124] Fasting, deeply embedded in the liturgical calendar, acted as a collective symbol that not only reinforced Christian doctrine but also shaped societal norms concerning sin, virtue, and the body. The communal nature of fasting ensured that individuals participated in a shared moral framework, reinforcing social bonds and a collective sense of purpose.

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[119] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 60.
[120] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 60.
[121] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 28.
[122] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 28.
[123] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 16-18.
[124] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 16.

The practice of fasting also aligns with Durkheim's claim that, because collective representations are formed over long periods, they are absorbed by and in turn enforced by structures of authority.[125] In the case of fasting, this societal authority would be God. From a Durkheimian perspective, fasting served to regulate both individual behavior and societal order by connecting bodily discipline with spiritual purity. The act of fasting became a means of collective penance for personal and societal sins, especially gluttony and lust, which were seen as threats to social and religious order. By abstaining from food, individuals performed acts of self-sacrifice that mirrored the collective ethos of restraint and moral purity, thus reaffirming their place within the Christian community. Collective representations, supported by societal authority, compel individuals to engage in actions and adopt ideas that may be uncomfortable or challenging.[126] Therefore, fasting as a collective representation had the power to act as a controlling mechanism to maintain a standard of behavior deemed proper. Durkheim would argue that this process of self-regulation through fasting contributed to the maintenance of social cohesion, as individuals were bound together by a common practice that reflected shared values. Furthermore, the utilization of these collective representations facilitated the control of social hierarchy as fasting, through the consumption of fish or charity, signaled a person's place in the societal hierarchy allowing for certain individuals to visually situate themselves above others. Fasting, and the ability to observe it comfortably, acted as a sign of status. It demonstrated one's moral purity and strength. The ability to acquire, consume, and serve foodstuffs that made fasting easier, such as fish, also demonstrated one's wealth and power. However, fasting was only one-half of Christian consumption patterns. Feasting represented the other.

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[125] Pickering, *Durkheim and Representations*, 16.
[126] Pickering, *Durkheim and representations*, 16.

The medieval calendar year was defined by major Christian feasts: Winter lasted from Michaelmas to Christmas, spring was from Christmas to Easter, summer was from the end of Easter to Lammas, and autumn was from the end of Lammas to Michaelmas.[127] Not only did holy days dictate the rhythm of the year, but they also influenced agricultural, social, and political activities. Harvests were often aligned with religious festivals like Lammas (Loaf Mass), which marked the blessing of the first bread made from the year's wheat harvest.[128] Likewise, labor patterns followed this sacred calendar, with holy days providing rest periods and moments of communal gathering, reinforcing Christian morality and solidarity.[129] A feast could be held in observance of a major religious holiday, such as Christmas, Easter, or Whitsun, or to mark significant agricultural events like the harvest.[130] It might also take place on a saint's feast day, the observance of which could be local or international.[131] Individuals needed to ensure that they observed both fasts and feasts properly. Although fasting was a major aspect of Christian teachings, people were also expected to participate in Church-sanctioned feasting. Whether a grand public gathering or a simple meal among friends, the feast was always an occasion for celebration, honoring a particular event or individual with joy and festivity.[132] This was the nature of religious feasting.

While the *Rule of Saint Benedict* focuses on the abstention from food, it does make passing references to feasting. Chapter 53 of the Rule of Saint Benedict, titled "On the Reception of

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[127] Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times: A Vivid, Detailed Account of Birth, Marriage, and Death; Food, Clothing, and Housing; Love and Labor, in the Middle Ages* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 1990), 105.

[128] George Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Norton, 1975), 354.

[129] The alignment of agricultural practices with the Christian calendar illustrates the profound integration of religion into economic and social life. By linking harvests and labor patterns to religious festivals, the Church not only regulated spiritual practices but also shaped the economic rhythms of medieval communities. Gies and Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times*, 105.

[130] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 50.

[131] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 50.

[132] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 50.

Guests," highlights the interplay between the monastic obligations of hospitality through feasting and fasting. The Rule permits the prior to break his fast for the sake of a guest but insists that this accommodation must not occur on "strict days" of fasting, and further emphasizes that "the brethren, however, shall keep the accustomed fasts."[133] This distinction reinforces the hierarchical nature of monastic life. The prior, as a figure of authority, is granted this privilege, preserving the community's ascetic discipline. His exception underscores the theological significance of hospitality, reflecting the Christian ideal of welcoming guests as if they were Christ. However, the prohibition against breaking strict fasts emphasizes the inviolability of communal observances, reaffirming spiritual devotion over social obligations. The Rule ultimately underscores power, hierarchy, and monastic discipline, positioning the prior as a mediator between the monastery and the outside world, while the monks exemplify ascetic purity.

Matthew Paris, a Benedictine monk of St Albans, recounted the celebration of the feast of St. Edward in 1252 by numerous religious leaders, highlighting the connection between hospitality and monastic discipline:

> Et dum hæc in partibus Borealibus Angliæ magnifice peragerentur, domino rege procurante, qui non immemor sancti Edwardi esse sustinuit, dominus episcopus Elyensis, et Westmonasterii et Waltham abates, in loco domini regis Londoniis, scilicet apud Westmonasterium, de mandato ipsius regis, festum sancti Ædwardi magnifice tam in ecclesiæ sollempnitatibus quam in palatii conviviis gratanter peregerunt.[134]
>
> (And while these things (the feast of St. Edward) were being magnificently carried out in the northern parts of England, under the direction of the lord king, who did not fail to remember Saint Edward, the lord bishop of Ely, along with the abbots of Westminster and Waltham, in the place of the lord king, namely at Westminster in London, by the command of the same king, joyfully celebrated the feast of Saint Edward with great magnificence, both in the solemnities of the church and in the banquets of the palace.) (translation: author)

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[133] Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Ch. 53.

[134] Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 5, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman, 1872), 270, https://archive.org/details/matthiparisien05pari/page/n11/mode/2up

The feast of Saint Edward, celebrated by the abbots of Westminster and Waltham alongside the bishop of Ely, required a careful balance between hospitality and monastic discipline. While marked by "great magnificence," the event combined religious solemnities with palace banquets, reflecting the abbots' dual role. They oversaw church ceremonies to demonstrate devotion while also managing lavish feasting, fulfilling royal expectations without compromising monastic ideals of moderation. This balancing act highlighted the broader challenge of monastic leadership, where feasting, though associated with excess, could be framed as an act of charity and devotion. By hosting the feast, the abbots reinforced both the abbey's authority and the symbolic power of food in medieval religious practice.

Under Abbot Samson at Bury St Edmunds hospitality, through feasting, was a prominent aspect of his engagement with foodstuff. When Abbot Samson was elected to his position, a great feast was held. Jocelin of Brakelond recounted that as soon as news arrived that Samson had been elected, he ordered monks to return to the abbey and begin making arrangements for a grand feast.[135] This immediate reaction underscores the pre-eminence of feasting as a symbolic and practical tool of leadership. While the details of the feast itself were not specified, Brakelond noted that 1,000 people attended.[136] The number of guests emphasizes the scale of the event, highlighting its performative nature. The large number of attendees reinforces the expectation states theory, as the size reflected Samson's elevated status and served to influence how others perceived his authority and competence. The celebratory feast that followed Samson's election was not merely an instance of communal rejoicing; it was a strategic demonstration of authority, largesse, and social expectation. The feast also exemplifies Ledyaev's concept of persuasive power, as Samson's

[135] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, 22.
[136] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, 24.

provision of food served to secure the loyalty and support of his guests. By offering a spectacle of abundance, Samson's actions encouraged his guests to view him as a legitimate and generous leader.

This highlights the role of commensality in leadership and aligns with Ledyaev's persuasive and inductive power, as Samson's generosity reinforced his reputation and authority. His actions reflect a strategic understanding of hospitality's significance in monastic life. Feasting was not just about provision but also symbolic capital, linking abundance to divine favor and monastic legitimacy. By exceeding expectations, Samson demonstrated competence, secured loyalty, and shaped perceptions of his leadership, aligning with both the Benedictine Rule and expectation states theory. His deliberate generosity was a calculated effort to strengthen his social and institutional standing.

Samson's awareness of the long-term implications of feasting is revealed the following day, as recorded by Brakelond. The day after Samson's celebratory feast, Brakelond recounted that "He (Samson) instructed his staff that they were to ensure above all that in his early days as abbot he could not be accused of meanness with food and drink, and that they were to give careful attention to the hospitality of his house."[137] This order speaks to the enduring power of commensality as a metric of leadership. This statement reflects both Ledyaev's notion of persuasive power and the fundamentals of the expectation states theory. By ensuring that no accusations of stinginess could be levied against him, Samson's actions demonstrated his understanding of how perceptions of generosity influenced his reputation as a competent and moral leader. The control of food and drink was not merely about physical provision but about symbolic

[137] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, 24.

capital. Samson's direction to his staff to maintain a high standard of hospitality indicates his use of inductive power, as he provided tangible benefits to those he sought to influence. His strategic approach to hospitality reveals a negotiation between religious obligation and social power.

Samson's strategic approach to hospitality extended to his treatment of guests and monastic officials. Brakelond noted that, despite planned cuts, "Guests qualified to receive accommodation were given it, and those worthy of special respect were entertained with honour; monastic officials and cloister monks alike ate in the refectory, and everywhere unnecessary expenditure was reduced."[138] This approach reflects Ledyaev's concept of persuasive power, as Samson's method of distinguishing "worthy" guests demonstrated his ability to influence perceptions of fairness and generosity without resorting to force or coercion. By visibly honoring specific guests while maintaining overall frugality, Samson reinforced his image as a just and competent leader. This approach reflects a calculated balance between generosity and frugality. While Samson upheld the core Benedictine principle of hospitality, he redefined the criteria for "worthy" guests and enforced uniformity in monastic dining. By ensuring that hospitality was still practiced but with tighter oversight, Samson secured his social standing while reinforcing the moral economy of the abbey.

Samson's creation of hunting parks exemplifies his strategic leadership. Brakelond writes, "He created several parks stocked with game and retained a huntsman with hounds. If an important guest was entertained, the abbot would sit with his monks in a woodland clearing to watch the hounds give chase, but I never saw him eat the meat of hunted animals."[139] This passage highlights Samson's use of resources to enhance the abbey's hospitality while maintaining personal abstinence. By providing high-quality game for guests yet abstaining himself, Samson projected

[138] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, 79.
[139] Jocelin de Brakelond, *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds*, 26.

both worldly competence and spiritual discipline, subtly asserting his moral and spiritual superiority over his important guests and aligning with Ledyaev's persuasive power. His hunting parks showcased wealth and status, securing elite goodwill while reinforcing his authority. At the same time, his refusal to eat hunted meat reflected his commitment to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*'s ascetic ideals. Samson's leadership embodied the dual role of spiritual guide and political steward, balancing social display with monastic principles. His approach aligns with Wagner's *Geltung* Hypothesis, which posits that individuals seek symbolic status over purely rational concerns. This is evident in his calculated use of feasting, hospitality, and charity to elevate the abbey's standing despite the financial issues they faced.

While extravagant feasting and hospitality were isolated to the leaders and high-ranking members of monasteries, regular monks were also given a taste of extravagance on feast days. While monasteries in the high medieval period, in theory, emphasized the importance of food restrictions as a form of piety, as early as the start of the twelfth century, diets in monasteries could be enhanced with pittances, a dish paid for by deceased lay people in return for prayers for their soul.[140] These appeared alongside the generals, the two dishes prescribed in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, and offered a reprieve from the normal diet.[141] The quality and number of pittances varied depending on the day. On feast days there would be great numbers.[142] Pittances would take the form of higher quality food than the normal meal, such as fresh fish or white bread.[143]

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[140] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 52.

[141] Barbara F. Harvey, *Living and Dying in England, 1100-1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 10.

[142] "Gerald of Wales claimed that he counted sixteen dishes in the refectory at Christ Church, Canterbury, on Trinity Sunday 1179, when he happened to be present." Harvey, *Living and Dying in England*, 11.

[143] Barbra F. Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 220.

Different orders would deal with pittances in different ways, but all would ultimately engage in the practice. Cluniacs and many other monks following the *Rule of St. Benedict* accepted pittances, and, as early as the tenth century, wealthier monastic communities consumed these on major feast days and anniversaries, while also receiving a third dish of *pulmentum*—a small serving of fish or meat—on many ordinary days.[144] Less affluent monasteries received a dish of *pulmentum* that consisted of fish, cheese, or eggs, sometimes combined.[145] The terminology for the dish varied: at Cluny in the late eleventh century, the third dish was a "common dish" on Sundays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, but a pittance on fasting days (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays).[146] Regardless of name, the third dish became a routine feature of Benedictine and Cluniac meals.

The Cistercians initially interpreted the *Rule of St. Benedict* more strictly, believing that anything not explicitly permitted was forbidden.[147] Until the late twelfth century, their General Chapter opposed daily pittances, considering any extra dish of *pulmentum* a pittance regardless of the day.[148] However, monastic appetites led to gradual adaptation, and a third dish became standard in Cistercian meals at the abbot's discretion.[149] By 1269–70, monks at Beaulieu Abbey, a moderately wealthy Cistercian house, received a daily pittance of fish alongside two common dishes.[150] Even the Carthusians, the most austere of the new orders, eventually followed suit. From 1259, their monks were allowed a modest pittance on two of the three days previously reserved for strict fasting on bread and water.[151]

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[144] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 217.
[145] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.
[146] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.
[147] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.
[148] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.
[149] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.
[150] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.
[151] Harvey, "Monastic Pittances in the Middle Ages," 218.

In addition to the pittance, while religious convictions varied from person to person, the operation of monasteries from the early thirteenth century onward demonstrated an overarching desire to eat meat. Loopholes were utilized to allow monks more freedom in their eating. Clear guidelines surrounded the food monks could eat in the refectory, where monks were meant to take their meals as outlined in the rule. However, no such rules existed to dictate the consumption of food outside the refectory. Therefore, there was a theoretical free reign of consumption elsewhere in the monastery. At many monasteries rooms known as misericord (place of mercy) were constructed for the sole purpose of giving monks a place to eat meat.[152] Therefore, while monks' diets were influenced by the rule of Saint Benedict throughout the high medieval period, the desire to eat taboo foods and engage in feasting remained.

For members of the ecclesiastical population, religious feasting was an important aspect of social display and engagement. Rare and prestigious foodstuffs were a common sight on their feasting tables. The household accounts of Richard de Swinfield, bishop of Hereford, for 1289/1290 vividly illustrate feasting practices.[153] On Good Friday, only bread, wine, and fish were consumed.[154] On Easter Sunday, however, consumption escalated dramatically. Records show that Bishop Swinfield and a party of eighty unidentified guests indulged in 66 gallons of wine, unlimited beer (exact amount unrecorded), 4 ½ calves, 1 ¾ carcasses of fresh beef, 1 ½ carcasses of salt beef, 5 pigs, 2 boars, 1 bacon, 3 deer, 22 kids, 88 pigeons, 12 capons, 1,400 eggs, cheese, and bread.[155] The presence of deer at Bishop Swinfield's feast signified his elevated status. This exclusivity made deer a fixture at feasts for the elite, including Henry III, who ordered 20 deer for

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[152] Jotischky, *A Hermit's Cookbook*, 143.

[153] For an in-depth analysis of fourteen other household accounts, see Christopher M. Woolgar, *Household Accounts from Medieval England*, British Academy, Records of Social and Economic History, new series, 17, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[154] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 53.

[155] Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 53.

his Easter feast in 1237, and again in 1249 when he requested that ten deer be transported to Westminster from Havering Park.[156] The logistical challenges involved in serving fresh venison—such as placing orders only days before the feast to avoid the need for salting—further emphasized the wealth and power of the host. Serving fresh venison, rather than preserved meat, reinforced hosts' control over resources and signaled their superior status. [157]

In the same year the bishop held a Christmas feast where, once again, there was a prominent display of foodstuffs. The feast included an array of meats: 2 geese, 8 partridges, 60 fowls, 4 pigs, 4 does, 2 calves, 1 boar, and 2 and 3/4th carcasses of beef, along with bread, cheese, and 40 gallons of wine.[158] Although boar was named in these records, it was likely domesticated pig, as wild boar was nearly impossible to procure, so rare in fact that even kings had difficulty acquiring them.[159] The records of the Christmas feast of Henry III in 1251 indicated that wild boar was served; however, most were likely domestic pigs that had been fattened for the occasion.[160] Outside of boar or other rare meats, the rest of the food served at religious feasts was foodstuff found in normal day-to-day consumption, only eaten in greater abundance on holy days. [161] The vast amount of food featured at the bishop's Christmas feast served an estimated 15 guests while the rest was presumably given to the manor's tenants and poor.[162] In medieval society, the ability to overeat

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[156] J Birrell, "Procuring, Preparing, and Serving Venison in Late Medieval England," in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180.

[157] Birrell, "Procuring, Preparing, and Serving Venison in Late Medieval England," 180.

[158] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 60.

[159] N. J. Sykes, "The Impact of the Normans on Hunting Practices in England," in *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 166.

[160] Sykes, "The Impact of the Normans on Hunting Practices in England," 166.

[161] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 60. The elevation of everyday foods during festive occasions highlights the role of feasting in transforming the mundane into the celebratory. This practice also emphasizes the communal aspect of holiday meals, where ordinary items became part of a shared ritual of abundance.

[162] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 60-61.

and give food to the poor was a mark of high status, a privilege of the wealthy that displayed their generosity, understood as magnanimity, or greatness of spirit, and largesse, the public giving of gifts to reinforce social standing.[163] Therefore, while the nobility indulged in extravagant foodstuff, the poor would be lucky to be given any leftovers, reinforcing medieval hierarchy through consumption patterns.

The bishop's role in this context added layers of significance. His feast was not simply an event of social indulgence but a demonstration of Christian charity, an essential aspect of ecclesiastical duty. Food distribution as alms—often drawn from the leftovers of the wealthy—was deeply embedded in Christian tradition.[164] In both great secular households and ecclesiastical establishments, leftover food was carefully collected in large alms tubs or buckets to be distributed to the poor and other deserving recipients.[165] These special alms-dishes were designed to facilitate this practice, ensuring that the remnants of feasts were redistributed to the poor.[166] Some wealthier households and religious orders even bypassed intermediaries, directly inviting the poor to dine with them during meals. One example of this practice comes from testimony given in 1307 during the inquiry into the sanctity of Thomas Cantilupe, former Bishop of Hereford. Hugh le Barber reported that it was Cantilupe's custom to dine daily with five or seven poor individuals.[167] On one occasion, while staying at Hampton Lucy in Warwickshire, the bishop instructed a household

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[163] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 2. For the continued importance of feasts and food-based gifts in elite households, see Lars Kjaer, "Food, Drink and Ritualised Communication in the Household of Eleanor de Montfort, February to August 1265," *Journal of Medieval History*, 37 (2011): 75-89. See also Louise J. Wilkinson, *The Household Roll of Eleanor de Montfort, Countess of Leicester and Pembroke, 1265: British Library, Additional MS 8877*, Publications of the Pipe Roll Society New Series, 63 (2020) for a scholarly edition with original Latin text and English translations.

[164] Christopher Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," *Journal of Medieval History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 15.

[165] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 15.

[166] Peter Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England* (Totnes: Prospect, 2008), 451-453.

[167] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 15.

member, Robert Whytacre, to go to the gate and bring in two "brothers."[168] When Robert returned saying no religious brothers were present, Cantilupe clarified that he meant the poor, not members of an order.[169] Upon hearing that twenty poor men were gathered outside, Cantilupe asked that five be brought in to join the meal.[170] While this could be seen as an act of generosity, the practice simultaneously reinforced social hierarchies, as the poor remained reliant on the goodwill of the wealthy for sustenance.

The bishop's position elevated the performative aspect of these feasts. Feasting in this context was not merely a display of abundance but a public enactment of the bishop's intermediary role: providing sustenance to the body while attending to the soul's salvation. This dual function aligned with Christian teachings, such as those exemplified in Luke 19:1-10, where Zaccheus's feast symbolized repentance and charity.[171] Depictions of this act, appearing in numerous manuscripts like the Eadwine Psalter (c. 1155–1160), further emphasized the link between generosity, hospitality, and religious virtue. The Eadwine Psalter shows Christ seated at a table adorned with plates and bowls of fish and bread, surrounded by other men. This scene underscores the connections medieval people made between spirituality and hospitality. Feasts were occasions for the social elite to showcase their status while also fulfilling moral and religious obligations to care for the less fortunate.

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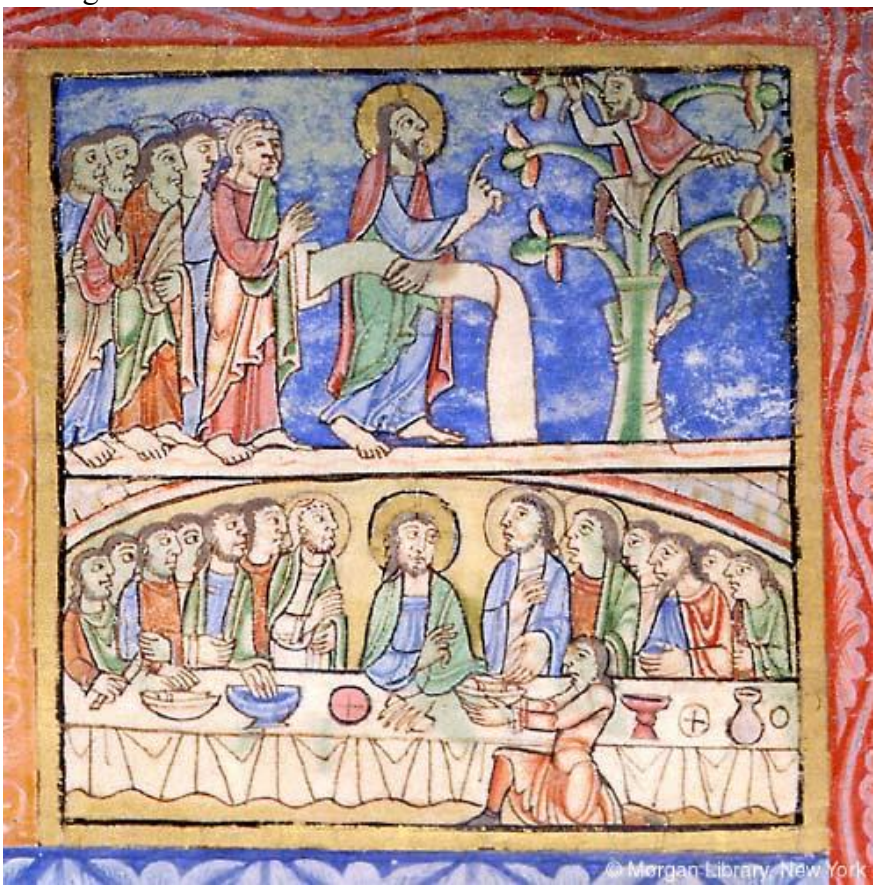
[168] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 15.
[169] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 15.
[170] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 15.
[171] *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, Luke 19:1-10, accessed March 27, 2025, https://thekingsbible.com/Bible/42/19?verse=1

Fig. 1: Christ Meeting Zacchaeus



Source: Christ Meeting Zaccheus and Christ in the House of Zaccheus. Eadwine Psalter, Morgan Library, MS 521, fol. 3v no. 1v a, zone 1, panel 3, ca. 1155–1160. Index of Medieval Art. Accessed February 5, 2025. https://theindex.princeton.edu/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=C20FDDA1-6AC4-451D-8BE1-0ABF4240CD22.

For lay populations, both rich and poor, religious feasting was a central part of their year. Christmas, and the two weeks of celebration that followed, was the most important celebration of the year.[172] For medieval society, Christmas was held in high regard as it celebrated the birth of Jesus.[173] However, for the lay population, this time of year also represented a break from work.[174] For the peasantry, the majority of the population, the middle of winter was a time of relative

[172] Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, 354.
[173] Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, 357.
[174] Gies and Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times*, 105.

relaxation. Fields were often either frozen or too wet to work eliminating a significant portion of their typical daily labour.[175] There was also significant foodstuff available in early winter owing to the harvest and slaughter that occurred in November. Illuminated manuscripts depict autumn preparations, such as peasants knocking down acorns from trees to feed pigs in the Queen Mary Psalter (c. 1310-1320). Therefore, Christmas represented a time of rest and plenty.

Fig. 2: Peasants Gathering Acorns

Source: Men Knocking Down Acorns to Feed Swine. Queen Mary Psalter, British Library, MS Royal 2 B VII, fol. 81v. Image via Medievalists.net. Accessed September 22, 2024. https://www.medievalists.net/2016/10/book-review-a-year-in-the-life-of-medieval-england-by-toni-mount/royal-2-b-vii-f-81v-2/.

In most households, the holiday followed the traditional pattern of twelve nights with the highlights being "Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, St Stephen's Day (26 December), the feast of the Holy Innocents (28 December), Twelfth Night, and Epiphany or Twelfth Day (6 January)."[176] Christmas itself was a grand celebration, and guests, from family to acquaintances, were an integral

[175] Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, 357.

[176] Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household, 1250-1600: Good Governance and Politic* Rule (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1988), 153.

part of the season.[177] Guests acted as the audience for individuals engaging in the power play that was medieval feasts. On Christmas Day, the lord of the manor was expected to provide a feast for his tenants that aligned with other previously discussed feasts in terms of the food served and the quantities provided.[178] However, social expectations went both ways. While the lord was expected to provide his tenants with a Christmas feast, the prevailing custom dictated that tenants needed to give their lords foodstuff throughout the year. At Christmas, tenants were expected to offer a hen or, in some instances, grain that would be brewed into ale.[179] However, this food was not given out of the kindness of their hearts. Instead, it was done to ensure that they would have continued access to necessary resources and that the Christmas feast, hosted by their lord, would happen. Through gift-giving, the poor ensured their lord would allow them to keep poultry and access fallen wood amongst other practices necessary for survival.[180] These gifts would often appear on the lord's dining table during the Christmas feast. Much like the feasts of royal courts discussed in the next chapter, smaller local feasts reaffirmed a lord's power. Lavish gift-giving and the receiving of gifts allowed a lord to retain and gain new allies.[181] In turn, those who attended feasts like the one held at Christmas affirmed their loyalty to the host and gave gifts to ensure they stayed in the host's good graces.[182]

The expectation that tenants showered their lords with gifts of foodstuff during the holidays ensured that the general population understood their place in the social hierarchy. Poor tenants

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[177] The inclusion of guests in Christmas celebrations served to reinforce social ties and hierarchies within the community. Feasting with both family and acquaintances fostered relationships that could be beneficial for social and economic alliances.

[178] Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, 357. The tradition of the lord providing a Christmas feast for his tenants was part of a broader pattern of lordship and vassalage. This feast served both as an act of hospitality and as a means to reinforce social hierarchies and obligations within the manorial system.

[179] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 34.

[180] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 9.

[181] Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink*, 409.

[182] Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink*, 409.

were taught that being a good Christian involved fulfilling obligations like gift-giving.[183] This expectation reinforced their subordinate status, while also setting a standard: a lord's reputation was tied to the generosity of his tenants.[184] Gift-giving also extended to the church. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, people could donate various foodstuffs such as wine and wheat, both used for mass.[185] Therefore, gift-giving served an important social function because it worked to maintain the delicately constructed social hierarchy. Gift-giving reinstated power dynamics for both the rich and the poor. It fortified the social norm of mutual exchange and care while maintaining the status of wealthy individuals.[186]

The dynamics of Christmas feasting and gift-giving in medieval society can be understood through the application of Ledyaev's power theory through persuasive, inductive, and authoritative power that operated to reinforce social hierarchies.[187] Persuasive power emerges in how tenants were encouraged to view gift-giving as a Christian moral obligation rather than a mere transaction. Through religious teachings, the Church framed generosity as integral to salvation and social harmony, making participation in gift-giving seem voluntary, despite underlying pressures.

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[183] The emphasis on gift-giving as a means of demonstrating Christian virtue highlights the intersection of religion and social obligation in medieval society. This expectation shaped the identities of the poor, aligning their moral standing with their ability to participate in these economic exchanges.

[184] This reciprocal relationship emphasizes the interconnectedness of social roles within the feudal system. Lords depended on the goodwill and loyalty of their tenants, while tenants relied on their lords for protection and resources, creating a dynamic of mutual dependency

[185] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 14.

[186] As outlined in the thesis introduction historian Felicity Heal argues that the act of gift-giving was used to construct social bonds between the giver and receiver and that the continued act of gift-giving was necessary to maintain social bonds. She also argues that the act of repetitive gift-giving directed towards the elite expressed power relationships and local patronage and the desire to reinforce existing bonds. See Felicity Heal, "Food Gifts, the Household and the Politics of Exchange in Early Modern England," in *Past & Present* 199, no. 1 (2008): 44, 54. Christopher Woolgar, building on Heal, in his work *Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England* argues that gift-giving was, "a customary part of late medieval culture, and that we need to understand the nuances of occasion," as the context in which a gift was given changes its meaning. In conjunction with examining the similarities and contrasts between the early modern and medieval periods, his focus is on the areas where the period understudy "offers additional perspectives on social and customary practices." Woolgar acknowledges that historians like Heal have identified the significance of food gifts in creating political networks but have yet to study it in an in-depth and meaningful way. Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 7-8.

[187] Ledyaev, *Power: A Conceptual Analysis*, 223-224.

Tenants, therefore, were persuaded that their gifts not only ensured social acceptance but also spiritual well-being, removing the need for overt coercion. In contrast, inductive power is evident in the lord's ability to reward tenants with access to resources, such as food and land, in exchange for their gifts. The Christmas feast itself, a display of the lord's generosity, served as a reward for loyal tenants, promising them continued access to these resources throughout the year. This system of positive reinforcement ensured that tenants remained invested in the reciprocal economy. Finally, authoritative power underpinned these exchanges, as the lord's social position and religious role obliged tenants to comply with the gift-giving customs. Even without explicit commands, the lord's status required deference, reinforcing the expectation that tenants would fulfill their obligations. These forms of power worked in tandem to maintain the social norms and delicate medieval hierarchy during the Christmas season, highlighting the complex mechanisms of power at play in and around the Christmas feast.

Fasting in the high medieval period had an extensive influence on monastic, ecclesiastic, and lay populations. It altered their daily dietary habits and made the act of eating and the abstention from it a constant balancing act. Food charity operated in conjunction with fasting, and this can be understood through expectation states theory, as the public redistribution of food to the poor actively shaped how people viewed those participating in it. Drawing on Durkheim's theory, fasting reinforced social cohesion and hierarchical control by fostering communal participation in symbolic acts of bodily discipline. Rooted in the liturgical calendar, fasting embodied a moral authority, linking self-restraint with spiritual purity. This practice upheld societal order, regulating individual behavior and aligning with Durkheim's idea that collective representations compel individuals to conform to group ideals. Through fasting, Christians engaged in collective penance, reinforcing both religious doctrine and the social hierarchy.

However, religious feasting was as impactful in medieval society. Hospitality through feasting was a central mechanism for garnering and reinforcing social power and prestige. Individuals hosting feasts engaged in various forms of power display. Authoritative, inductive, and persuasive power were wielded to ensure a host's reputation was upheld and enhanced. As with fasting, the effects of feasting on how hosts and guests are publicly perceived can be analyzed through Expectation States Theory, which suggests that successfully hosting a feast reinforces and elevates one's social standing. The elaborate displays involved in feasting also align with Wagner's Geltung Hypothesis, as hosts invested significant resources to demonstrate their prestige and impress others. Through all of this, every individual who engaged in the practices of fasting and feasting was socialized, shaping religious and social life. Religious socialization is evident as medieval populations engaged with food as a material expression of Christian ideology, with fasting and feasting tied to religious celebrations and moral teachings. Peer socialization occurred through communal fasting and feasting, where individuals of different social ranks shared collective experiences, fostering social bonds and reinforcing shared values. Anticipatory socialization was reflected in the way participants rehearsed behaviors linked to their future societal roles, learning expected customs through the rituals of fasting and the celebratory practices of feasting. Ultimately, the interplay between fasting and feasting not only structured medieval religious and social life but also served as a powerful mechanism of socialization, embedding individuals within a framework of communal identity, hierarchical distinction, and moral expectation.

Chapter Two:

Elite Feasting: Tables of the Court

In medieval England, feasting practices and hospitality were central to the socialization processes that defined the political, cultural, and hierarchical order of society because of growing courtly culture. These gatherings, particularly in royal and aristocratic households, served as multifaceted sites where power was performed, prestige was cultivated, and cultural norms were learned and enforced. The significance of feasts extended beyond sustenance; they were meticulously orchestrated rituals that impacted wider medieval society. Anticipatory socialization was evident in the preparation for and participation in feasts, where individuals learned and rehearsed behaviors associated with their future roles. The enforcement of table manners, as outlined in courtesy books like Daniel of Beccles' *Urbanus Magnus*, emphasized the connection between dining etiquette and social refinement. Lessons on moderation, restraint, and composure at the table taught individuals how to present themselves within the structured social hierarchy, preparing them for future interactions in elite settings. Peer socialization occurred through the collective experience of dining, where participants observed and emulated the behaviors of their peers. Feasts, with their carefully curated seating arrangements and hierarchical order, created spaces for individuals to negotiate status and develop a sense of belonging within their social group. Finally, religious socialization intersected with these practices through rituals like the saying of grace and almsgiving, which were associated with eating practices. These elements reinforced moral and spiritual values while emphasizing the social responsibilities of the host and guests. These forms of socialization—anticipatory, peer, and religious—intersected at elite feasts and reinforced the social structure, ensuring individuals internalized their societal roles and responsibilities both within their immediate communities and in the broader societal order.

Court culture in high medieval England referred to the social, political, and cultural practices that emerged within the households of royalty and the elite. It encompassed ideals of refined behavior, chivalry, and hospitality, showcased through the performance of power through elaborate ceremonies, feasts, and public displays. Rooted in hierarchical structures such as vassalage, court culture shaped how elites interacted, governed, and projected their status, blending local traditions with broader European influences. This culture served as both a model for elite households and a framework for social organization, deeply influencing medieval society.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 accelerated the adoption of continental courtly practices in England.[188] Norman rulers introduced sophisticated French administrative and cultural models, blending them with Anglo-Saxon traditions.[189] Central to these changes was the increasing formalization of household roles, which reflected a magnate's wealth and capacity for leadership.[190] The system of lords and vassals provided the hierarchical framework within which elite households operated. Titles such as "seneschal," "dapifer," and "steward" became integral to the household organization, reflecting both functional authority and the web of obligations that tied lords to their vassals.[191] The Domesday Book captures the prevalence of titled officers in Norman elite households, emphasizing their importance as markers of aristocratic identity and governance.[192] Employment in the courts itself was rooted in the unimpeachable loyalty individuals could offer their lord as the followers surrounding a magnate symbolized his power,

[188] David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300* (London: Routledge, 1992), 290.
[189] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 290.
[190] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 290-291.
[191] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 282.
[192] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 291.

with their loyalty serving as a visible testament to his status.[193] These roles linked the domestic and administrative functions of the household to the broader medieval hierarchy.

The rise of centralized royal courts as hubs of culture and diplomacy also significantly influenced the evolution of courtly culture. Drawing on Carolingian models, English and Norman courts established hierarchical structures that mirrored those of the king's household.[194] Roles such as "butler" and "constable," adapted from Frankish and Scandinavian traditions, highlighted the connection between royal authority and the organization of elite households.[195] In the royal household of Henry I (r.1100-1135), these coveted roles were given out based on talent, not lineage, reflecting the way behavior could lead to social mobility within the court.[196] These courts became models for elite households, promoting ideals of refinement and social order. Courtly culture also evolved in tandem with the ideals of chivalry, which emphasized bravery, loyalty, and courtesy, impacting daily behavior in the growing courts from roughly 1170 onwards.[197]

Hospitality was central to the expression of courtly culture, with feasting serving as both a practical necessity and a symbolic act.[198] Cooks and butlers, whose roles extended beyond mere functionality, became figures of significant influence within the household. The cook of the Earl of Chester in 1086, for example, controlled substantial estates, demonstrating the symbolic importance of food in courtly life.[199] The economic underpinnings of such grand displays were

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[193] David Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France, 900-1300*, 1st ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson/Longman, 2005), 41.

[194] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 284-285.

[195] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 284-285.

[196] Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France, 900-1300*, 41.

[197] Crouch, *The Birth of Nobility: Constructing Aristocracy in England and France, 900-1300*, 41.

[198] For discussions of the social, economic, and artistic dimensions of great households in medieval England, see Martha Carlin, "Catering for Great Households: Practical Matters," in *The Elite Household in England, 1100–1550: Proceedings of the 2016 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Christopher Woolgar, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 28 (Donington, Lincolnshire: Shaun Tyas, 2018), 336–54.

[199] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 296.

deeply tied to the landholdings and agricultural surpluses of elite households. These estates not only supported the daily operations of the household but also provided the resources necessary for large-scale feasts, tournaments, and other performative events. The ability to host such events was a direct reflection of a lord's economic power and his ability to mobilize the labor of those within his domain.

Feasts were also occasions for reinforcing social hierarchies, as the foodstuff, manners, and structure of the feast highlighted distinctions between the host and his guests. The size and scope of elite households, which could number in the hundreds of individuals, underscored the labor and resources required to sustain these displays.[200] Such households depended on the contributions of laborers and tenants, whose work supported the grandeur of courtly life. These dynamics not only reflected but also reinforced the social inequalities of the medieval world, as the wealth and privilege of the elite were maintained through the efforts of those outside their ranks.

Feasting also served as a powerful site of performance, allowing hosts to project their economic prosperity and reinforce their political networks. The rituals surrounding food preparation and consumption, from the role of the cook to the presentation of dishes, became performative acts that reinforced the household's position within the social hierarchy.[201] The performative role of food extended beyond sustenance, as feasts became sites of social interaction and cultural exchange. These events allowed elites to host peers, forge alliances, and display their adherence to the values of hospitality and largesse. The connection between courtly culture and feasting highlights how food acted as a unifying force, tying together the ideals of governance, social stratification, and cultural sophistication.

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[200] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 293-294.
[201] Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, 296.

A feast is described in *The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth,* an Anglo-Norman poem written in the mid-thirteenth century by Walter of Bibbesworth with the aim of helping children of an English baron learn French, the language of the Norman aristocracy.[202]

> A young man of fashion came here from a dinner
> And told us about the feast, how the service was arranged.
> Without bread, wine and beer no feast will be comfortable,
> But they had as much as they wanted of all three, the boy told us.
> He talked about another feast and the courses they had to eat.
> First the boar's head well armed and the snout fully garlanded,
> Then venison with frumenty and many other varied things:
> Cranes, peacocks and swans, kids, sucking-pigs and hens;
> Then they had rabbits in gravy, all coated in sugar,
> Mace, cubebs and cloves and plenty of other spicery,
> *Viaunde de Cypre* and *maumenee*, red and white wine in plenty;
> Then plenty of other roasts, each alongside another,
> Pheasants, woodcocks and partridges, fieldfares, larks and plovers roasted,
> Brawn, crisps and fritters or rose-sugar as corrective;
> And when the table was removed, blanch powder as whole sweetmeat
> And other noble things in plenty.[203]

The poem describes the sequential presentation of dishes in a structured and hierarchical manner, beginning with a boar's head and progressing through venison, game birds, and elaborately

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[202] Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Baronial Household of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 125.

[203] Andrew Dalby, *The Treatise/Le Tretiz of Walter of Bibbesworth*, (Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2012), 152-155. See also Constance B. Hieatt, "'*Ore pur parler de array de une graunt mangerye'*: The Culture of the '*Newe Get*,' circa 1285," In *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in its Contexts, 700–1600*. Ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk. Norman, Oklahoma, 1982, pp. 219–233 for another edition and translation of the 'feast' portion of Walter de Bibbesworth's "Tretiz.". For the best current scholarly edition of *Bibbesworth's Tretiz* see William Rothwell, ed. *Walter de Bibbesworth: Le Tretiz, from MS. G (Cambridge University Library Gg.1.1) and MS. T (Trinity College, Cambridge 0.2.21), Together with Two Anglo-French Poems in Praise of Women (British Library, MS. Additional 46919)*, The Anglo-Norman Online Hub (Aberystwyth, 2009), now at https://anglo-norman.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/bibb-gt.pdf.

prepared sweets. Each course not only satisfied physical hunger but also served as a statement of power and privilege, reinforcing the social order through the communal act of dining. The description of the feast from Walter of Bibbesworth's *Treatise* highlights the profound social disparities in food access and consumption between the elite and poor. The central elements of meat, wild game, and sugar, illustrate how feasts were not merely occasions of sustenance but elaborate performances of power, wealth, and social control. Each of these food categories carried distinct social meanings, reinforcing the boundaries between the aristocracy and the peasantry.

Meat serves as one of the most prominent symbols of wealth in this passage, signifying power, privilege, and status. While peasants subsisted primarily on bread, pottage, and vegetables, the elite had regular access to a diverse array of meats.[204] The boar and venison stand out as particularly symbolic elements. The exclusivity of hunting rights and access to the king's forests meant that only the aristocracy could legally acquire these animals.[205] Game animals such as rabbits, cranes, peacocks, and swans were subject to strict hunting regulations governed by forest laws, with poaching carrying harsh penalties for peasants.[206] In contrast, for the aristocracy, hunting was a leisure activity that demonstrated physical prowess, martial skill, and control over nature. The preparation and display of game meats at feasts symbolized the extension of this control into the domestic space, transforming the hunt's triumph into a performance of status and power.

Beyond the boar and venison, the variety of roasted meats further highlights the host's wealth and social standing. The list of cranes, peacocks, swans, geese, larks, piglets, and chickens

[204] For an in-depth discussion of medieval dietary patterns and the types of food eaten see Adamson, *Food in Medieval Times*.
[205] Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval* England, 17.
[206] Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval* England, 17.

illustrates the breadth of animal proteins available to the elite. For most people, however, access to such a wide array of meats was unattainable. The average person's diet was centered around grains, legumes, and vegetables, with meat appearing only on special occasions or religious feast days, if at all. The disparity in access to meat underscored broader social and economic inequalities, making its abundance at elite feasts a visible marker of privilege. This abundance signified not only access to diverse resources but also the extensive labor required to hunt, rear, and prepare such a wide range of animals. The spectacle of peacocks, often served with their feathers reattached, epitomized visual grandeur as well as culinary extravagance.[207] The reference to "roasts, each different from the next" reveals the high culinary standards at such feasts. Unlike the simple stewed or boiled dishes typical of peasant diets, elite cuisine involved labor-intensive processes requiring the expertise of skilled kitchen staff. This emphasis on variety reinforced notions of social hierarchy, where the range and refinement of one's diet reflected one's social rank.

Finally, the presence of sugar and imported spices at the feast signals another layer of luxury and exclusivity. Unlike meat and game, which could be produced locally, sugar had to be imported from distant markets, including North Africa, India, and the Middle East.[208] Its inclusion at the feast reflects the host's participation in global trade networks and their capacity to afford imported commodities. Unlike the sweeteners available to peasants (mainly fruit and occasionally honey), sugar was a luxury item associated with wealth, refinement, and participation in elite

[207] Beyond the use of spices for flavor and color hosts of a feast would encourage their cooks to experiment with physical extravagances. One such instance is the careful way swans or peacocks would be skinned and roasted. The skin of the bird would be carefully flayed from the body, the body would then be roasted, and then their skin would be draped over the body and presented as if still alive. While spices brought a visual color pop to a dish alongside a flavorful one the physical manipulation of a dish like this would have been another way to passively showcase power to guests. Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 136.

[208] Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval* England, 11-12.

culinary culture. Its appearance at the end of the feast marked a ceremonial closure, reinforcing the elite's capacity to indulge in sensory pleasures denied to the peasantry.

The overall structure of the feast, with its clear division of courses, further reflects the social stratification embedded in medieval dining practices. The treatise's reference to the first course featuring boar and venison, the second course of roasted meats, and the third course of sweets and confections highlights the symbolic hierarchy of food presentation. Each course increased in refinement, signaling the progression from sustenance to spectacle. Such segmentation was absent in peasant meals, which were more likely to be served in a single pot or dish, as soup was a staple of their diet.[209] The course structure also mirrored the social hierarchy of the diners themselves, with the elite served first and lower-status individuals (like servants) eating last or separately. Thus, even the structure of the meal mirrored the broader social order, reinforcing elite control over both the food and the people who consumed it.

An examination of other foodstuffs that would appear on the dining tables of the elite offers further insight into the utilization of feasts to display power, prestige, and social norms through socialization. A thirteenth-century collection of recipes, written in Anglo-Norman, offers insight into the food that appeared on the tables of the elite. The recipes highlight the extensive spice use, focus on rare ingredients, and flair for dramatic presentation seen in accounts of elite feasts.[210]

The aroma of roasted goat, infused with saffron and ginger, would have immediately captivated the senses of medieval feasters:

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[209] Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval* England, 30-31.

[210] Constance B., Hieatt, and Robin F. Jones. "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections Edited from British Library Manuscripts Additional 32085 and Royal 12.C.Xii." *Speculum* 61, no. 4 (1986): 859-82. See also Giles E. M. Gaspar and Faith Wallis, "*Salsamenta pictavensium*: Gastronomy and Medicine in Twelfth-Century England," *English Historical Review*, vol. 131, no. 553 (Dec. 2016): 1353-85 for a collection of twelfth-century English culinary recipes.

> "Coment cheveril serra rosti od tute la pel. Ci enseigne coment cheveril serra rosti od tutte la pel. Pernez le cheveril e le tuez, e eschaudez cum un porcel, e festes oster les boeus, si festes turner; e puys metez sus une broche, e metez dedenz bons especes, e bone farsure festes des especes, od seffran e sel dedenz; e puys metez a fu; e puys kaunt il serra achaufe lardez le od long larduns; e de broche coliz e kaunt il serra quit, adressez le od la farsure, oveke bon gyngivre" (How to roast kid in its skin. Instructions for roasting kid in its skin. Take the kid and slaughter it; scald like a young hog, clean and dress it; then put it on a spit; in it, put fine spices and a good filling made with the same spices, adding saffron and salt; then put it to roast; when it is hot, lard it with long lardoons; when it is cooked, remove it from the spit and serve it with the filling and good ginger.)[211]

The recipe for roasted kid epitomizes the dramatic flair of elite feasting. The dish was designed to be visually striking and aromatically appealing, emphasizing the host's wealth and ability to procure luxurious ingredients. Spices such as saffron and ginger, prominently featured in the recipe, were among the most prized commodities of the medieval period, their inclusion signifying both economic power and access to global trade networks. The preparation process—stuffing the kid with a rich filling, larding it with long lardoons (fatty bacon and or pork fat)—underscores the performative nature of such dishes. Serving a dish prepared with such care and extravagance would have impressed guests, confirming the host's status and reinforcing the collective acknowledgment of their elevated position within the social hierarchy.

A recipe for rose pottage instructs cooks to "take a handful or two of rose petals," signaling the importance of luxury and visual presentation in elite cuisine:

> "Rosee. E un autre viaunde, k'ad a noun rosee. Pernez une poyne de foilles des roses ou deus, e festes bien braer, e destemprez oue let des alemaundes ou de vache; e pus pernez e liez bien espes de payn de wastel e des oefs, e colurez le de seffran, ejettez une foille desus ou deus, e de sucre; e pus en dresses" (Rose pottage. Here is another dish, which is called rose pottage. Take a handful or two of rose petals and grind well, and mix with almond or cow's milk; then take wastel bread and eggs and thicken the mixture well; color it with saffron, toss a petal or two on top, sprinkle with sugar, and then serve.)[212]

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[211] MS B.L. Additional 32085, fols. 117v-l19v. Translation is that of Hieatt and Jones, "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections," 863, 874.

[212] MS B.L. Additional 32085, fols. 117v-l19v. Translation is that of Hieatt and Jones, "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections," 864, 875.

Like the recipe for roasted kid, rose pottage reflects a deliberate effort to showcase cultural refinement and sophistication. The inclusion of rose petals, almond milk, and saffron further highlights the use of elegant and or rare ingredients to signify luxury. Sugar, another expensive import, elevated the dish further, marking it as an exclusive offering. The aesthetic appeal of rose pottage, with its vivid color and delicate garnishing, exemplifies how elite cuisine was as much an art form as it was a source of nourishment. These culinary displays were crucial in shaping perceptions of power and prestige.

Even the humble act of preparing a soup, as seen in the preparation of *luce en supes*, became a reflection of the host's attention to detail and mastery of culinary techniques:

> "Luce en supes. E un autre viaunde, ke ad a noun luce en supes. Perboillez vostre luce, e pus pernez oingnouns e festes myncer [e festes frier] en gresse, e metez vyn oue seffran; e tut manere de pessons, ke bon seit en ceste manere, cum ci orrez coment, serrunt fris saunz gresse: pernez le moel de l'oef ou deus, e oingnez la paele dekes autant ke ele face semblaunt de sure; e ke la paele seit bien neire e bien sue de un drap, e ke la paele seit bien gardee ke ele ne seit trop chaude ne trop freide, e metez un poi de sel, ou de sucre; si cum vos metez chescun apres autre desus un plater, ke nul ne apruce autre; e pus dresses" (Luce in soup. Here is another dish, which is called luce in soup. Parboil the luce; then take onions and mince them and fry them in grease, and add wine and saffron; (the luce) and all kinds of fish, for best results, should be fried without grease in the manner here described; take an egg yolk or two and rub the (hot) pan until it appears to sweat; the pan should be quite black and wiped thoroughly with a cloth, and should be carefully watched lest it become too hot or too cold; sprinkle a little salt or sugar on (the surface of) the pan; [fry the fishes] as you would serve them on a plate, putting in one after the other without letting them touch each other; then serve.)[213]

The preparation of luce, meaning pike, in soup demonstrates how culinary practices reflected the balance between simplicity and refinement. This dish required meticulous handling to ensure the fish was presented attractively, with instructions emphasizing precision in frying and garnishing. Even such "simple" dishes carried layers of meaning tied to expertise, restraint, and attention to

[213] MS B.L. Additional 32085, fols. 117v-l19v. Translation is that of Hieatt and Jones, "Two Anglo-Norman Culinary Collections," 864, 875.

detail. Their careful preparation and presentation further underscored the host's ability to control and orchestrate the dining experience. It also highlights the generosity of the host as he is providing entire fish for guests in attendance.

The food served at the feasts of the wealthy was a direct reflection of an individual's power and status within the social hierarchy. The lavishness of the feast table not only showcased wealth but also served as a medium through which socialization occurred among the guests. The types of dishes presented, their preparation, and how they were served all played critical roles in reinforcing social norms and expectations. As guests indulged in the various foodstuffs found on the feast table, they participated in a communal ritual that reinforced their positions within the social order. The recipes quoted above provide a lens to explore the interplay of food, power, and socialization in medieval elite culture. These dishes exemplify culinary practices that were as much about symbolic display as they were about sustenance, functioning as both a medium for asserting hierarchical relationships and a reflection of the broader cultural values of the time.

The food at the table, and the way it was served, also reflected and shaped an individual's power and prestige. The thirteenth-century household rules of Bishop Robert Grosseteste illustrate this. *The Rules of Saint Robert Grosseteste*, written between 1245 and 1253, is a treatise on household and estate management produced in England.[214] The text itself was written for the Countess of Lincoln, Margaret de Quincy, a widow.[215] This treatise was specifically tailored to widows as their responsibilities extended beyond the purview of married noblewomen,

[214] Louise J. Wilkinson, "The Rules of Robert Grosseteste Reconsidered: The Lady as Estate and Household Manager in Thirteenth-Century England" in T*he Medieval Household in Christian Europe, c. 850-c. 1550: Managing Power, Wealth, and the Body*, ed. Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 306. Thanks to historian Martha Carlin for assistance with dating and navigating the numerous historical debates surrounding the dating of the text.

[215] Michael Burger, "The Date and Authorship of Robert Grosseteste's Rules for Household and Estate Management," *Historical Research* 74, no. 183 (January 2001): 107.

encompassing broader oversight of estates and the household but offers insight into the operation of households as a whole.[216] Grosseteste, who served as Bishop of Lincoln from 1235 until his death in 1253, brought his theological and administrative expertise to this text, providing guidance that blended practical advice with moral instruction.[217] The nineteenth rule states: "…command that your dish be so refilled and heaped up, and especially with the light dishes, that you may courteously give them from your dish to all the high table on the right and on the left, and where you shall please they shall soon have what you yourself had before you."[218] Thus, while individuals were encouraged to share with their peers—an act that could maintain or elevate social prestige—the social differences between groups remained clear, with those at the high table, a raised dining table often located on a platform (dais) at one end of the great hall, receiving better food.[219] Additionally, those with whom the host chose to share luxury food items also gained social prestige, the intimate sharing of food within elite circles further entrenching social hierarchies.

The appearance of these various foodstuffs on the feast table of a wealthy household would have acted as a means of power display. Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis provides the framework through which to understand how the lavishness of the food and its presentation served as a tool for social display and competition. Wagner's hypothesis posits that human behavior is often driven

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[216] Burger, "The Date and Authorship of Rules for Household and Estate Management," 108.

[217] Burger, "The Date and Authorship of Rules for Household and Estate Management," 110.

[218] Robert Grosseteste, The Rules of Saint Robert Grosseteste, with introductory notes by Andy Staples (2002), https://www.penultimateharn.com/the-rules-of-robert-grosseteste/; English translation from Walter of Henley's Husbandry, Together with an Anonymous Husbandry, Seneschaucie, and Robert Grosseteste's Rules, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Lamond, with an introduction by W. Cunningham (London: Longmans, 1890), 121–45; notes and glosses by Martha Carlin, "The Rules of Saint Robert Grosseteste," https://sites.uwm.edu/carlin/the-rules-of-saint-robert-grosseteste/, accessed February 12, 2025. See also Dorothea Oschinsky, *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) for critical editions and translations of Robert of Grosseteste's Rules among other texts.

[219] Constance B. Hieatt, a scholar of language and literature, and Sharon Butler, a specialist in language, argue that this maintenance of social status could explain why numerous feast records have limited quantities of luxury food items despite the great number of guests. Only a privileged few would see the host share from their plate. Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, *Curye on Inglysch: English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century (Including the Forme of Cury)* (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, 1985), 5-6.

by the desire to "show off" and compete, sometimes at the expense of practicality or rational considerations. This is clear in the feast recipes and household accounts of feasts, which reveal a penchant for ostentatious displays of wealth and social status through ingredient choice and display. According to Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis, the lavish use of spices, rare ingredients, and the complex preparation of dishes was not merely about enhancing flavor, aroma, and appearance but about creating a spectacle that underscored the host's social prestige. By serving dishes that were lavishly seasoned and presented, hosts could effectively display their wealth and social standing. The ability to afford such extravagant ingredients and preparation methods became a mark of high status, turning the feast into a competitive arena where social hierarchy was visually and gastronomically reinforced. The constant competition seen at these feasts point to the ways in which social competition compelled actions in the pursuit of increased social prestige and played an important role in the development of cultural food habits.[220]

The lavishness of these feasts, highlighted by the remarkable types and quantities of food consumed, was an essential aspect of socialization, where the ability to host and attend such grand gatherings influenced individuals' social assessments and treatment in future interactions.

[220] Historian Stephen Mennell uses Elias's figurational sociology to explore how social relationships and interdependencies have shaped the history of cooking and eating in England and France, focusing on the evolving nature of these relationships and the role of conflict and competition in driving social change. "Figurational sociology is inherently concerned with processes of development. The word 'figuration' is used to denote the patterns in which people are bound together in groups, strata, societies - patterns of interdependence which encompass every form of co-operation and conflict, and which are very rarely static and unchanging. Within a developing social figuration, modes of individual behaviour, cultural tastes, intellectual ideas, social stratification, political power and economic organisation are all entangled with each other in complex ways which themselves change over time in ways that need to be investigated. The aim is to provide a 'sociogenetic' explanation of how figurations change from one type to another, why some have greater potential for change than others, the consequences for people's lives and the way they perceive them. Elias finds a major driving force of social and cultural development in conflict and competition - perhaps 'contest' is the best general word - between social groups, whether territorial units, social strata, or smaller groupings of people. The patterns of conflict and forms of competition change and develop over time and find expression in countless ways. The dominant anthropological school of thought has neglected precisely these forces in the development of food habits, exaggerating the homogeneity and uniformity of the groups they study." These ideas can be applied to these feasts and Elias's theory interplays with the theoretical framework of the present thesis. Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 16.

Alongside Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis this can be understood through the expectation states theory, which stated that everyday objects could act as social objects that reflected social prestige and helped to shape reality. When viewed in conjunction with Wagner's framework, these concepts allow for a nuanced understanding of how feasts functioned as both a reflection of personal power and a reinforcement of societal roles.[221] Together, these theories elucidate the intricate dynamics at play in the social fabric of medieval life, where feasting not only fulfilled dietary needs but also served as a critical arena for negotiating and affirming social identities and hierarchies.

How individuals engaged with foodstuffs on the table was as important as the dishes themselves in terms of power and prestige displays. The primary method of socialization at these feasts was through the observance of table manners which, as argued by Bynum, were, "more an aesthetic and social event than a gastronomic one."[222] The consumption of food had to complement the presentation of the fine delicacies, so behavior and manners at these gatherings were heavily regulated. While most elite individuals would have learned from their family and peers how to behave at a feast, some written guides did exist. While courtesy books would only become widely accessible by the early modern period due to the affordability of printing, some were developed during the high medieval period, a direct result of the developing court culture. Early courtesy books depict civil behavior as more than simply following rules of etiquette; it is portrayed as a way for individuals to demonstrate their virtues within the broader community.[223] Civility, therefore, is not just about specific rules, but a comprehensive skill set that helps people interact harmoniously across social contexts.[224] These manuals, a set text in schools by 1300 in England,

[221] Berger, Rosenholtz and Zelditch, "Status Organizing Processes," 481.
[222] Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 60.
[223] John Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility" 268.
[224] Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility," 268.

addressed table manners along with various other important social skills and rules for functioning in society.[225]

The earliest and most substantial courtesy book from high medieval England was the *Urbanus Magnus* (The Book of the Civilized Man), written c. 1180 by Daniel of Beccles.[226] Daniel of Beccles was closely connected to the court of Henry II, where he was regarded as a skilled poet and writer in both prose and verse, and described as a member of the king's household.[227] His work reflects the cultural and intellectual milieu of Henry II's court.[228] The poem took the form of a father's advice to his son.[229] However, the closing lines indicate the wide audience he hoped to reach and the connection back to the growing courtly culture: "Clerus precipue, miles, matrona, puella, Quilibet ingenuus hec seruet scripta nouella. Rex uetus Henricus primo dedit hec documenta, Illepidis, libro que subscribuntur in isto.[230] (The clergy especially, the knight, the matron, the maiden—let every freeborn person observe these new writings. Old King Henry first gave these instructions to the unpolished, which are written in this book.) (translation: author) The book indicates its goal in its opening lines, beginning with "Moribus ornari, si uis lector uenerari,

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[225] Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility," 271.

[226] Fiona E. Whelan, "Urbanus Magnus: A Twelfth-Century 'Courtesy Text' and Three Oxford Manuscripts," *The Bodleian Library Record* 27, no. 1 (April 2014), 12. See Fiona Whelan, *The Making of Manners and Morals in Twelfth-Century England: The Book of the Civilised Man* (London and NY: Routledge, 2017) for a further exploration of *Urbanus Magnus* and medieval table manners. See also David Crouch, *The Chivalric Turn: Conduct and Hegemony in Europe before 1300* (Oxford: OUP, 2019), for further discussions of table manners and *Urbanus Magnus*. Owing to inaccessibility, the thesis was not able to engage with these sources but notes their importance.

[227] Servus Gieben, "Robert Grosseteste and Medieval Courtesy-Books," *Vivarium* 5, no. 1 (1967): 51.

[228] See H. Rosamond Parsons. "Anglo-Norman Books of Courtesy and Nurture," *PMLA*, 44 (1929): 383-455, for an exploration of five courtesy books designed to train young pages in the disciplines of knighthood and the codes of chivalry.

[229] Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility," 272.

[230] Daniel of Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus, atque de vetustate monachorum: ex codicibus manuscriptis, et auctorum scriptis*, ed. J. Gilbart Smyly (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co., Longman, Green, & Co., 1939), 73. See also Daniel of Beccles, *The Book of the Civilised Man: An English Translation of the Urbanus Magnus of Daniel of Beccles*. Trans. Fiona Whelan, Olivia Spenser, and Francesca Pitrizzo (London and NY: Routledge, 2019) for a modern translation of the text. Owing to accessibility issues, the thesis was unable to utilize the material.

Nobilis inter heros urbanam ducere uitam,"[231] (If you wish, reader, to be respected, be adorned with good manners, and live an urbane life as a noble among heroes.) (translation: author) The text goes on to argue that "Que fructum parere solet, est doctrina probanda. Dicitur a doctis pars illi summa bonorum Est concessa uiro quem ditat gratia morum."[232] (Teaching that is accustomed to bear fruit is to be approved. The learned say that the greatest share of good things is granted to the man whom the grace of good manners enriches.) (translation: author) This implies that, to be respected, a person needed a good grasp of manners. These manners extended to all aspects of life. However, those connected to food and dining were some of the most important for socialization.

Urbanus Magnus contains numerous references to food, eating, and dining. These references serve as a guide not just for proper behavior but also for navigating the complex social dynamics of medieval feasting. The following rule addresses the significance of speech at the table, emphasizing how words—or their absence—can reflect one's social awareness and respect for the host: "Diuitis in mensa cenando pauca loquaris, Ne dicare loquax uel garrulus inter edentes."[233] (At the table of a rich man, speak little while dining, lest you be called talkative or a chatterer among those eating.) (translation: author) This rule emphasizes restraint and moderation in speech during meals, particularly at the table of elite hosts. Speaking too much or too freely was seen as a breach of decorum, marking one as unrefined or disruptive. The concern here was not just practical—avoiding arguments or distractions—but also deeply tied to maintaining one's reputation. By observing this rule, individuals signaled their respect for the host, the occasion, and the social order itself. The restriction on speech aligns with the broader theme of feasting as a microcosm of society, where rank and order were paramount. Quiet guests demonstrated self-

[231] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 1.
[232] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 1.
[233] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 24.

control and an understanding of their place in the social hierarchy, reinforcing the elite's values of discipline and grace. The admonition to "speak little while dining" reflects the tension between contributing to the conviviality of a feast and avoiding overstepping social boundaries. Each rule served to reinforce the idea that an individual's behavior at the table mirrored their suitability for their position in the wider social hierarchy.

Building on the theme of decorum and self-control at the table, another rule advises: "Dum cibus ore latet, uerbis non lingua ministret."[234] (While food lies hidden in the mouth, let the tongue not serve with words.) (translation: author) This rule underscores the importance of decorum and hygiene at the table. Talking with food in one's mouth was likely considered unseemly and disrespectful, signaling a lack of refinement. More broadly, it reflects the way dining behavior was seen as a reflection of one's inner character. Proper table manners symbolized self-discipline; a trait valued not only for maintaining the smoothness of the meal but also as evidence of moral virtue. This concern reveals the dual role of manners: while they facilitated harmonious interaction at the table, they also acted as a marker of belonging, distinguishing the civilized from the uncultured. By adhering to this rule, individuals demonstrated their awareness of, and submission to, social norms.

As the guidelines move beyond speech to address consumption habits, the next rule warns: "Bachi more caue calices haurire gulose."[235] (Beware of greedily draining cups in the manner of Bacchus (God of wine).) (translation: author) This caution against overindulgence in alcohol underscores the tension between enjoyment and restraint, a central theme in medieval dining etiquette. Excessive drinking was associated with the loss of self-control, an attribute that could

[234] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 25.
[235] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 25.

harm one's social standing. In a hierarchical society, where the dining table was a stage for social performance, drunken behavior would be seen as a failure to uphold aristocratic ideals of moderation and grace. The elite's emphasis on controlled consumption also reinforced their position as paragons of refinement. While the lower classes might indulge without thought, the nobility was expected to model temperance, thus further entrenching social distinctions.

Shifting from drinking to the physical act of eating, *Urbanus Magnus* also stresses precision and propriety in its guidance: "Paruus in ore bolus ponatur, dente teratur"[236] (Let a small morsel be placed in the mouth, let it be chewed with the teeth.) (translation: author) The instruction to take small bites and chew properly reflects the almost surgical precision with which dining behavior was regulated. Such attention to detail reinforced the idea that every aspect of one's public behavior mattered, even something as mundane as individual bites. This rule also ties into the idea of feasting as a form of socialization. By training individuals to eat with care and propriety, the elite ensured that the behaviors learned at the dining table would carry over into other areas of life. These practices instilled a shared understanding of appropriate conduct across all groups present at the table, reinforcing the legitimacy of the existing social order. Yet they also allowed room for individual performance. An individual's mastery of dining etiquette could enhance their personal prestige and social mobility, though only within the limits prescribed by their rank.

Attention to detail extends further into the mechanics of serving and cleanliness, as shown in the following directive: "Scindendo carnes conuiua peripsimet illas; Postea pane tuo cultrum tu terge popatum."[237] (When cutting meat, let the guest separate them carefully; afterward, wipe your greased knife on your own bread.) (translation: author) This rule highlights the importance of skill

[236] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 24.
[237] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 24.

and cleanliness in dining. Skillfully cutting meat demonstrated one's competence and refinement, while cleaning the knife with bread ensured the table remained neat and orderly. Both actions were small but significant markers of one's upbringing and social awareness. The focus on cleanliness and skill also speaks to the broader theme of hierarchy and distinction. Those who lacked these abilities were marked as unrefined and unworthy of inclusion in elite circles. Dining, then, became a form of subtle gatekeeping, reinforcing existing social divides.

Moving from individual actions to broader social considerations, seating arrangements are also addressed: "Cum puer es, puero tibi sessio sit puerilis, Cum iuuenis, iuueni tibi sessio sit iuuenilis,"[238] (When you are a boy, let your seating be with a boy; when you are a youth, let your seating be with a youth.) (translation: author) This rule underscores the rigidly hierarchical nature of medieval society, where every individual had a designated place, both at the table and within the social structure. Seating arrangements reflected an individual's status and role in the community. By adhering to this rule, individuals demonstrated their understanding of, and compliance with, the broader societal order. This aligns with the theme of a place for everyone, and everyone in his place, which underpinned much of medieval social organization. Proper seating ensured that hierarchy was visually and physically reinforced at every meal.

Finally, *Urbanus Magnus* emphasizes the importance of physical composure during meals, even in the smallest gestures: "Forte sedens banco caueas pede tundere bancum."[239] (If sitting on a bench, beware of striking the bench with your foot.) (translation: author) The regulation of physical comportment at the table reflects the comprehensive nature of medieval dining etiquette. Even subtle actions like tapping one's foot were scrutinized, as they could disrupt the harmony of

[238] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 23.
[239] Beccles, *De Urbanus Magnus*, ed. Smyly, 23.

the event or draw unwarranted attention. This rule ties into the broader theme of self-discipline, a quality highly valued in medieval aristocratic culture. Maintaining physical composure signaled respect for the occasion and for those present, further reinforcing the social order and the individual's place within it.

Across the rules outlined in the *Urbanus Magnus*, a clear picture emerges of the dining table as a site of both social control and performance. Feasts served as a controlled environment where social norms were enacted, hierarchies reaffirmed, and individual identities shaped. The meticulous attention to detail—regulating speech, eating, drinking, and even physical movements—reveals the elite's desire to maintain order and assert their values of discipline, grace, and respect for hierarchy. While these rules promoted harmony and civility, they also served as tools of exclusion. By setting rigorous standards, the elite ensured that only those who could conform to these practices were deemed worthy of inclusion. The dining table thus became a microcosm of medieval society, reflecting its broader structure of rank and order.

The feast table was not just a site for sustenance but a medium through which power and social norms were reinforced. Feasting practices reflect Ledyaev's concept of authoritative power, the ability to command adherence based on the powerholder's inherent position. The host's control over every aspect of the feast, from seating arrangements to the sequence of dishes served, underscored their dominance. Enforcing the rules of etiquette further demonstrated the host's control over both the event and the cultural norms governing social interactions. Inductive power, which involves overcoming resistance by offering rewards, also played a significant role in feasting. Inclusion in these exclusive events and the potential for increased social capital acted as incentives for conformity. Feasts provided opportunities for individuals to elevate their status by mastering etiquette and refinement. Dining at the table of a powerful host further conferred

legitimacy and prestige on the attendees, reinforcing their social position while affirming the host's authority.

The emphasis on manners at the table extended naturally to the broader organization of the dining hall and the structured order of operations at a feast. Just as individual behavior reflected one's place within the social hierarchy, the physical arrangement of the space and the sequence of events at a feast were meticulously designed to reinforce rank and status, ensuring that every aspect of the occasion mirrored the societal order. Great emphasis was placed on seating arrangements as they mirrored the wider social hierarchy. Bishop Robert Grosseteste in his household rules touches on this idea. Rule seventeen stated:

> Make your free men and guests sit as far as possible at tables on either side, not four here and three there. And all the crowd of grooms shall enter together when the freemen are seated, and shall sit together and rise together. And strictly forbid that any quarrelling be at your meals. And you yourself always be seated at the middle of the high table that your presence as lord or lady may appear openly to all, and that you may plainly see on either side all the service and all the faults. And be careful of this, that each day at your meals you have two overseers over your household when you sit at meals, and of this be sure, that you shall be very much feared and reverenced.[240]

In addition, rule fourteen stated: "Command strictly that all your guests, secular and religious, be quickly, courteously, and with good cheer received by the seneschal from the porters, ushers and marshals, and by all be courteously addressed and in the same way lodged and served."[241] The seating order and hospitality practices described in Bishop Robert Grosseteste's Rules reveal the profound role that feasts and communal dining played in reinforcing medieval social hierarchy and the household's structured operation. Rule seventeen emphasizes not only the physical arrangement of individuals at the table but also the symbolic significance of those arrangements. By ensuring that free men and guests were seated with clear order and symmetry, Grosseteste

[240] Grosseteste, *The Rules of Saint Robert Grosseteste*.
[241] Grosseteste, *The Rules of Saint Robert Grosseteste*.

reinforced the importance of visualizing and maintaining rank and unity. The directive for grooms to enter, sit, and rise together reflects a deliberate effort to underscore their collective status as subordinate, contrasting with the individual autonomy of freemen and guests.

The central position of the lord or lady at the high table, a place of privilege only for the most important people, highlights their role as the focal point of authority and surveillance. From this vantage point, the lord or lady could openly display their power, monitor the household's service, and ensure that discipline was upheld. The requirement for daily overseers during meals further reinforces the theme of control and oversight, emphasizing that the dining hall was not merely a space for communal enjoyment but also a site of social governance. The connection between the lord's visible presence and the cultivation of fear and reverence reflects the broader dynamics of medieval lordship, where authority was asserted through both proximity and surveillance.

Rule fourteen complements this structured approach with an emphasis on hospitality. The instructions to receive guests—whether secular or religious—quickly, courteously, and with good cheer reflect the dual role of the feast as both a site of power and a display of generosity. Hospitality was a crucial marker of elite status, demonstrating the household's resources and the lord or lady's ability to act as a gracious host. The involvement of seneschals, porters, ushers, and marshals in welcoming guests underscores the institutional nature of these practices, where every aspect of the guest's experience was carefully choreographed to reflect the household's prestige.

Together, these rules illustrate the dining hall's function as a microcosm of medieval society, where social order was both displayed and reinforced. The arrangement of seating, the conduct of the meal, and the rituals of hospitality served not only to facilitate the feast but to manifest and perpetuate the hierarchical structure of the household and, by extension, the broader

feudal world. Through such practices, authority was both exercised and performed, blending practical governance with symbolic power.

The order of operations at a feast further cemented social rank and allowed for displays of power and prestige to peers. The order of a feast is preserved in the work of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, a Franciscan who held a range of church positions.[242] His widely read encyclopedia, *De proprietatibus rerum*, written in 1240, was intended to be used by both students and the public.[243] In it, he describes the process of a feast:

> Meat and drink be ordained and convenient to dinners and to feasts, for at feasts first meat is prepared and arrayed, guests be called together, forms and stools be set in the hall, and tables, cloths, and towels be ordained, disposed, and made ready. Guests be set with the lord in the chief place of the board, and they sit not down at the board before the guests wash their hands. Children be set in their place, and servants at a table by themselves. First knives, spoons, and salts be set on the board, and then bread and drink, and many divers messes; household servants busily help each other to do everything diligently and talk merrily together. The guests be gladded with lutes and harps. Now wine and now messes of meat be brought forth and departed. At the last cometh fruit and spices, and when they have eaten, board, cloths, and relief are borne away, and guests wash and wipe their hands again. Then grace is said, and guests thank the lord. Then for gladness and comfort drink is brought yet again. When all this is done at meat, men take their leave, and some go to bed and sleep, and some go home to their own lodgings.[244]

Bartholomaeus Anglicus's description of the order of operations at a feast provides a detailed glimpse into how medieval dining was both a ritualized performance and a social event designed to reinforce hierarchy and prestige. Every step in the process, from preparation to departure, was meticulously planned to reflect and maintain the social order, offering opportunities for both the host and guests to display their status and refinement. Durkheim's theory of collective

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[242] D. C. Greetham, "The Concept of Nature in Bartholomaeus Anglicus (fl. 1230)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41, no. 4 (1980): 664.

[243] Greetham, "The Concept of Nature in Bartholomaeus Anglicus,"663, 664-665.

[244] Translation is that of John de Trevisa, Bartholomew Anglicus, *Medieval Lore: An Epitome of the Science, Geography, Animal and Plant Folk-Lore and Myth of the Middle Age, Being Classified Gleanings from the Encyclopedia of Bartholomew Anglicus on the Properties of Things*, ed. Robert Steele (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), 51.

representations provides a framework for understanding the symbolic and ritualized aspects of medieval feasting practices, particularly through the seating, serving, and preparatory phases of the event as a means of social control. These elements of the feast were deeply imbued with meanings that reinforced shared values of hierarchy, civility, and authority while visually and materially legitimizing the social structure.

The preparatory phase of the feast emphasized the host's wealth and organizational prowess, conveying a sense of grandeur and propriety through meticulous arrangements. The table adorned with cloths and towels ready for service underscores the host's ability to create a luxurious and orderly environment.[245] These material preparations reflected the lord's resources and power, visually asserting their status to all attendees. The symbolic act of handwashing before the meal, while serving a practical hygienic purpose, further highlighted the ritualized nature of the feast. This act marked the transition into a space governed by civility and reinforced the feast as a collective event steeped in tradition and hierarchy.

Seating arrangements provided a direct and visible representation of societal order. The lord and lady would be seated at the center of the high table, and guests were seated according to rank, with higher-status individuals closer to the host and lower-status attendees placed further away or at subordinate tables. Children and servants occupied distinct positions that emphasized their roles within the household hierarchy. For example, the separation of servants at their own table signaled the divide between those who served and those who were served, maintaining the

[245] For an archaeological perspective on how food practices and associated material culture shaped urban identities in medieval Hampshire, see Ben Jervis, "Cuisine and Urban Identities in Medieval England: Objects, Foodstuffs and Urban Life in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Hampshire," *Archaeological Journal*, 169:1 (2012): 453-479.

focus on higher-status participants and reinforcing the collective understanding of social distinctions.

The serving order and the progression of the meal itself were performances of abundance, refinement, and cultural sophistication. Each step in the sequence, as described by Bartholomaeus Anglicus, was meticulously choreographed to reflect the host's wealth and ability to provide not just sustenance but an experience of variety and luxury. The placement of knives, spoons, and salts; the gradual presentation of bread, drink, and diverse dishes; and the inclusion of music transformed the feast into a multisensory spectacle. These embellishments elevated the host's social prestige, showcasing their refinement and ability to orchestrate a grand occasion.

The conclusion of the feast was equally ritualized, reinforcing hierarchy, gratitude, and religious devotion. The recitation of grace served multiple symbolic and social functions, underscoring not only the guests' gratitude to the host but also their acknowledgment of divine providence. As a public, vocalized act, grace transformed an otherwise personal moment of reflection into a communal declaration of shared values and religious observance. This performative aspect emphasized the moral authority of the host, who presided over an event that was both materially abundant and spiritually sanctioned. By facilitating the public performance of grace, the host framed the feast as a site of both social hierarchy and moral order, situating their authority within a broader cosmological framework. Moreover, grace reinforced the host's role as a mediator of divine blessing. In Christian thought, abundance was often seen as a reflection of divine favor, and the host, by extension, became the earthly conduit of this providence. Thus, the public acknowledgment of grace symbolically validated the host's social and moral superiority. It also reinforced the expectation that wealth should be used charitably for the benefit of others, as we have seen, a central tenet of Christian hospitality. By providing a setting where grace was

publicly performed, the host demonstrated their adherence to these moral obligations, affirming their social legitimacy. The communal saying of grace also marked the official conclusion of the feast, delineating the boundaries between the liminal, festive space of the banquet and the ordinary rhythms of daily life. Handwashing after the meal, which mirrored the pre-dinner ritual, further reinforced this transition. The ritual closure of the feast was not a mere matter of practicality but a deliberate act that re-established social and moral order. The final offer of additional drink before departure can be seen as an extension of this moral economy. It embodied the host's final act of generosity, one last reminder of their wealth, piety, and status as a benevolent patron. This structured departure was essential to the social script of feasting, ensuring that the symbolic balance of reciprocity, gratitude, and hierarchy was visibly upheld.

Seating, serving, and the overall choreography of the feast collectively functioned as representations of societal values. These rituals affirmed the legitimacy of the social order by making hierarchy visible and material. The feast became not only a space for sustenance but also a stage for the enactment of social norms and power dynamics. Every aspect, from the arrangement of the hall to the progression of the meal, contributed to a shared understanding of rank, authority, and communal identity. Through these carefully curated actions, the feast embodied and perpetuated the cultural values of medieval society.

However, the power dynamics of hospitality worked both ways. Potential guests could also suffer social damage if excluded from major meals. In 1239 Henry III hosted a Christmas dinner that led to social upheaval:

> Cum igitur die Natalis Domini divina obsequia solempniter ac magnifice, ut decuit, consummarentur, ne mundi gaudia proveniant impermixta, quidam casus inopinatus festivalem lætitiam perturbavit. Cum enim in palatio suo regio dominus rex pransurus appareret, comes Marescallus G[ilebertus] cum suis commilitonibus ad januam intraturus advenit; cui adventanti regii ostiarii et marescalli ipsi comiti intrare volenti procaciter

ingressum vetuerunt, et ejus familiam, tenentes baculos pro virgis, impudenter convitiando repulerunt. Hæc autem cum vidisset comes, perpendit indubitanter aliquem susurronem inter dominum regem et ipsum discordiam seminasse, nec hoc factum fuisse sine domini regis auctoritate; et dissimulans ad hospitium suum in civitatem remeavit. Jussitque lituo invitatorio non tantum suos, sed quotquot voluerunt, ne tantæ festivitatis serenitas obnubilaretur, ad mensam suam pransuros convenire. In crastino vero, missis ad regem viris honorabilibus, sciscitabatur comes ab eo, quare sibi ipsi et fideli suo, tamque nobili, tantam injuriam tali die sine meritis irrogasset, seque promisit in omnibus judicialiter contra omnes, qui inter tam nobiles personas odium nequiter suscitassent, purgaturum. Quibus dominus rex commotus, respondit: "Unde comiti Gileberto cornua? unde sibi quod contra me, contra quem durum est sibi calcitrare, levat comminando, ut aiunt, calcaneum? Ricardum fratrem suum, comitem, cruentum proditorem, mihi et regno meo rebellem, in Hibernia letali bello contra me cepi hostiliter dimicantem, qui merito exhæredandus in carcere saucius detinebatur, donec, Deo vindice, vitam terminaret. Huic autem comiti G[ileberto], precum importunitate archiepiscopi Cantuariensis A[dmundi], gratia non merito suam concessi hæreditatem, cum voluero subtrahendam." His auditis comes non mediocriter perturbatus ad partes secessit aquilonares, regis manifestam expertus indignationem. Nec postea ipse vel frater ejus Walterus sincero corde regem, ut prius, dilexit, nec fortunato casu prosperabantur.[246]

(So then, on the day of the Nativity of the Lord, when the divine services were solemnly and magnificently, as was fitting, completed, lest the joys of the world come unmixed, an unexpected event disturbed the festive joy. For when the lord king appeared in his royal palace intending to dine, Count Marshal Gilbert came with his fellow knights to the gate, about to enter; but to him as he approached, the royal doorkeepers and marshals insolently forbade entry to the count who wished to go in, and drove back his household, holding staffs in place of rods, while brazenly insulting them. When the count saw this, he clearly perceived that some whisperer had sown discord between the lord king and himself, and that this had not been done without the authority of the lord king; and feigning indifference, he returned to his lodging in the city. And he ordered by a summons with a horn not only his own men, but as many as wished, to come dine at his table, so that the brightness of so great a festival would not be darkened. On the next day, the count, having sent honorable men to the king, inquired from him why he had inflicted such a great injury on himself and his loyal and noble man on such a day without cause, and he promised that in all matters he would judicially clear himself against anyone who had wickedly stirred up hatred between such noble persons. The lord king, provoked by this, responded: "Where did Earl Gilbert get the horns? Whence does he get the idea that he lifts his heel against me, against whom it is hard for him to kick, as they say, with threats? His brother Richard, the earl, a blood-stained traitor, rebel against me and my kingdom, I seized in Ireland, fighting against me in deadly battle. He, who by right ought to be disinherited, wounded, was held in prison until, with God as avenger, he ended his life. To this Count Gilbert, at the insistence of Archbishop Edmund of Canterbury, I granted his inheritance, not by merit, but by grace, which I may take away when I will." When these things were heard, the count, greatly disturbed, withdrew to the northern regions, having clearly experienced the king's indignation. Nor thereafter did he

[246] Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 3, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman, 1872), 522-524, https://archive.org/details/matthiparisien03pari/page/n9/mode/2up

> himself, or his brother Walter, love the king with a sincere heart as before, nor did they prosper in fortunate affairs.) (translation: author)

The Christmas dinner offers a vivid example of how hospitality could serve as a mechanism of social control and a tool for asserting royal authority. The exclusion of Earl Gilbert Marshal and his retinue from the dinner underscores the dual nature of hospitality in medieval England—not only as a means of fostering community and loyalty but also as a performative instrument for signaling political favor or disfavor. This incident illustrates the centrality of feasting in reinforcing social hierarchies, publicizing royal prerogatives, and shaping perceptions of nobility and loyalty.

The refusal of entry to Earl Gilbert, enacted by the king's doorkeepers and marshals, was a calculated act of exclusion that transformed the dinner into a stage for political messaging. A dinner, traditionally a space of inclusion and unity, became a site of public humiliation for Gilbert, signaling his diminished status within the royal court. The conspicuous rejection served as a symbolic act, emphasizing the king's prerogative to define who was—or was not—worthy of participating in this communal expression of royal generosity. For Gilbert, the affront was not merely personal but a public demonstration of disfavor that reverberated through the elite social network. By denying Gilbert entry Henry sent a clear signal to his courtiers and the broader elite: access to the royal table was a privilege contingent on loyalty and favor.

The role of hospitality in this incident also underscores its dual-edged nature. While eating together often reinforced bonds of loyalty and community, it could also serve as a potent tool for exclusion and humiliation. Gilbert's exclusion not only undermined his personal prestige but also destabilized his position within the aristocratic hierarchy. As a public affront, the incident diminished his perceived social worth, with cascading effects on his relationships and alliances. In high medieval England, where reputation and honor were critical to political and social power, such an act carried significant consequences. The account also highlights the Earl's strategic

response. By organizing an alternative dinner and inviting as many as wished to come dine at his table, Gilbert sought to mitigate the damage to his reputation. This reactive assertion of status illustrates the high stakes of commensality as a performative act. Nevertheless, his subsequent inquiry to the king, coupled with the latter's biting reply—Where did Earl Gilbert get the horns?—reveals the precariousness of elite status when juxtaposed against the authority of the crown.[247]

The public nature of Gilbert's exclusion transformed what might have been a private grievance into a widely recognized spectacle. In a society where access to the king and his table was a marker of favor and influence, being denied such access was tantamount to a public demotion. The text notes that Gilbert believed that the king himself had authorized this affront, linking the act directly to royal authority. This moment underscores the performative and symbolic aspects of medieval hospitality, where inclusion or exclusion from communal meals could reinforce or destabilize social hierarchies. Furthermore, the king's justification of his actions—pointing to Gilbert's familial associations and his own discretionary granting of Gilbert's inheritance—highlights the relationship between hospitality and the distribution of royal patronage. By framing his denial of hospitality as a response to perceived arrogance and ingratitude, Henry reasserted his control over the narrative of loyalty and service. This incident exemplifies how medieval kings wielded hospitality as a tool of both reward and punishment, shaping the political landscape through public demonstrations of favor or disfavor.

This incident demonstrates the deeply political nature of medieval hospitality. Dinners, albeit focused on eating, also became venues for the enactment of power dynamics and the assertion of royal authority. By excluding Gilbert, Henry leveraged the performative power of

[247] This comment also carried added weight as it acted as a sexual insult. Thanks to historian Martha Carlin, who clarified this subtext of the comment.

hospitality to reinforce his control over the elite and to publicly relegate a prominent elite to a position of disfavor. This aligns with broader patterns in medieval society, where access to communal rituals and spaces often served as markers of inclusion or exclusion within the social hierarchy. The repercussions of this incident extended beyond the dinner itself. The observation that neither Gilbert nor his brother Walter ever again regarded the king with a sincere heart underscores the lasting impact of such acts of exclusion on personal and political relationships. Moreover, the Earl's withdrawal to the northern regions suggests that exclusion from hospitality could lead to broader alienation from royal favor, weakening the bonds of loyalty that were critical to maintaining political stability.

The manipulation of seating arrangements at feasts further reinforced these social hierarchies. At Christmas in 1241, Henry III again used seating at a feast to send a political message:

> Die igitur Natalis Domini ad instantiam legati, cui rex summopere placere studuit, cinctus est ab ipso rege balteo militari nepos ipsius legati, nomine Advocatus; eidem quoque redditum contulit rex triginta librarum properanter, quem idem tiro statim vendidit, sciens se in proximo cum domino suo recessurum. Et eodem die rex quendam Provincialem cingulo simili sollemniter insignivit, et redditu ditavit opulento. Finitis itaque in ecclesia sollempniis, rex in ampliori regia Westmonasterii pransurus legatum, quem ad prandium invitaverat, in eminentiori loco mensæ, scilicet in regali sede, quæ in medio mensæ est, non sine multorum obliquantibus oculis, collocavit. Ipso nempe rege a dextris ipsius, Eboracensi vero archiepiscopo a sinistris ejus sessionem accipientibus, consederunt consequenter tam prælati quam cæteri magnates, secundum ordinem suæ dignitatis ac potestatis, rege sic volente et convivas disponente.[248]
>
> (On the day of the Nativity of the Lord, at the insistence of the legate, whom the king was most eager to please, the legate's nephew, named Advocatus, was girded by the king himself with the military belt. To this same man, the king also promptly granted an income of thirty pounds, which the said newly made knight immediately sold, knowing that he would soon depart with his lord. And on the same day, the king solemnly girded a certain Provencal with a similar belt and enriched him with a generous income. When the solemnities in the church had concluded, the king, intending to dine in the larger hall of the palace at Westminster with

[248] Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 4, ed. Henry Richards Luard (London: Longman, 1872), 83-84, https://archive.org/details/matthiparisien04pari/page/262/mode/2up

> the legate, whom he had invited to the meal, placed him at the most prominent place at the table, that is, the royal seat, which is in the middle of the table, not without the sideways glances of many. With the king seated at the legate's right hand, and the Archbishop of York at his left, the other prelates and magnates then took their seats in order, according to the rank of their dignity and power, as the king willed and arranged the guests.) (translation: author)

The manipulation of seating arrangements at Henry's Christmas feast illustrates the intricate role of feasting in medieval England as a mechanism for both reinforcing and reshaping social hierarchies. The act of the king seating the papal legate in the place of honor, thereby displacing other high-ranking guests and demoting himself in the process, reveals how such ostensibly ceremonial acts carried significant political weight. In this context, seating was far more than a practical arrangement—it was a tangible representation of social order, rank, and royal favor.

As discussed earlier, in medieval courts, seating arrangements at feasts were carefully curated symbols of the social hierarchy. The placement of individuals at the table signified their rank, proximity to the host, and their status within the political and ecclesiastical order. By elevating the papal legate to the royal seat, Henry disrupted this established order, signaling his prioritization of papal relations over the expectations of his court. Matthew's observation that this act drew "obliquantibus oculis" (sideways glances) from the attendees underscores the discontent and tension it created among the displaced bishops and magnates.

The king's actions during the feast highlight the performative nature of hospitality in medieval England. By granting the place of honor to the legate, Henry publicly affirmed his allegiance to the papacy, likely as part of broader political or ecclesiastical negotiations. This act was further reinforced by the knighting of the legate's nephew and the generous endowment of income, both of which signaled royal deference to papal influence. In this way, the feast became a stage not just for celebration but for the deliberate display of political alliances and power dynamics. At the same time, this manipulation of seating arrangements disrupted the established

order of precedence. Bishops and magnates were forced to shift one place down the table, which, while seemingly minor, constituted a significant slight in the context of a feast where every detail of protocol reflected an individual's standing. Being moved even one seat lower symbolized a loss of royal favor and, consequently, a potential diminution of prestige in the eyes of one's peers.

Henry's orchestration of the seating arrangement exemplifies how hospitality could be used as a tool to reinforce royal authority and manipulate social hierarchies. By taking the central seat beside the legate, Henry visually aligned himself with the papacy, relegating even the Archbishop of York, a senior ecclesiastical figure, to a less prominent position. This act asserted the king's control over the feast and, by extension, over the social order it represented. The calculated nature of this gesture highlights the king's awareness of the symbolic power of feasting. Feasts were spaces where relationships between ruler and ruled were made visible, and the manipulation of such spaces allowed the king to communicate his priorities and allegiances. In this instance, the elevation of the legate over the English elite and clergy underscored the king's alignment with the papacy, signaling a willingness to privilege external alliances over domestic expectations.

The disruption caused by the seating arrangement extended beyond the feast itself. For the displaced bishops and magnates, the public nature of the slight could not be ignored. In high medieval political culture, where honor and reputation were essential to maintaining influence, even a subtle reordering of precedence could have lasting repercussions. The detailed account of the event suggests that this was not an isolated occurrence but part of a broader pattern in Henry's court, where feasting was used as a stage for asserting authority and reshaping relationships.

Kings and other elites, who were expected to hold impressive feasts, were especially vulnerable to the pressures of hospitality. In the latter half of the 1240s, Henry III experienced financial struggles. He owed substantial sums of money as a result, Matthew of Paris claims, of

his over-expenditure in various areas such as the resources required to fund his armies or the cost of goods purchased from foreigners.[249] As a result, in 1251, Henry had to seek hospitality from his subjects:

> Mensæ quoque regalis dapsilitas consueta et hospitalitas abbreviata est, et postposita solita verecundia. Et jam cum abbatibus, prioribus, clericis, et viris satis humilibus hospitia quæsivit et prandia, moraturus et munera postulaturus. Nec jam civilis habebatur hos[pes], qui regi et regalibus hospitia cum procurationibus splendidis exhibuisset, nisi numeribus nobilibus et magnis regem ipsum, reginam, et Edwardum, et aulicos singillatim respectos honoraret; immo nec erubuit ipsa, non tanquam gratuita, sed jam quasi debita postulare. Ipso namque tempore, ne exempla aures suspendant auditorum, cum Roberto Passelewe, quem nuper obprobriis in capella sua apud Westmonasterium turpibus lacessivit, prandens dominus rex, amplis est respectus muneribus. Nec appretiabant aulici et regales donativa, nisi pretiosa et sumptuosa, utpote palefridos desiderabiles, cuppas aureas vel argenteas, monilia cum gemmis præelectis et zonis imperialibus, et consimilia. Et facta est curia regalis Romanæ consimilis, in quæstu pro meretrice sedens, vel prostans veracius.[250]
>
> (The customary abundance of the royal table and hospitality was also diminished, and the usual modesty was set aside. And now the king sought out lodging and meals from abbots, priors, clerics, and men of rather humble status, intending to remain and to request gifts. Nor was he now considered a courteous guest who offered hospitality with splendid provisions to the king and his royal attendants, unless he honored the king himself, the queen, Edward, and each of the courtiers individually with great and noble gifts. Indeed, she was not ashamed to ask for them, not as if they were free gifts, but now almost as though they were owed. At that time, lest the examples stun the ears of listeners, when the lord king dined with Robert Passelewe, whom he had recently attacked with shameful insults in his chapel at Westminster, he was rewarded with lavish gifts. Nor did the courtiers and royals value donations unless they were precious and costly, namely, desirable palfreys, gold or silver cups, necklaces with select gems and imperial belts, and such like. And the royal court became like that of Rome, sitting, or more truly, standing, in pursuit of gain like a prostitute.) (translation: author)

The account reveals the centrality of hospitality as both a symbol and a mechanism of power in medieval society.[251] For kings and the elite, dinner and feasts were not merely celebratory gatherings; they were essential displays of wealth, authority, and generosity. The king's financial

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[249] Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 4: 395.

[250] Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, 5: 199.

[251] See Julie Kerr, "The Open Door: Hospitality and Honour in Twelfth/Early Thirteenth-Century England," *History*, vol. 87, no. 287 (July 2002): 322-335 for discussions of the role of honour as a motivating factor in hospitality during twelfth- and early thirteenth-century England.

struggles during this period rendered him incapable of upholding the customary expectations of royal hospitality, publicly signaling his declining power and influence.

In medieval England, the ability to host lavish feasts or dinners was synonymous with authority. Commensality allowed kings and the elite to reinforce their social status, reward loyalty, and cultivate political alliances. Henry's financial difficulties meant he could no longer fulfill these expectations. Matthew underscores the depth of the crisis, describing how the "customary abundance" of royal hospitality gave way to desperation, with the king seeking lodging and meals from abbots, clerics, and even humble men. This stark reversal marked a public acknowledgment of his diminished capacity to uphold the rituals of kingship. Hospitality was more than an act of generosity; it was an essential mechanism for maintaining social order and status. As Valeri Ledyaev's power theory suggests, power is exercised through control over resources and the ability to shape perceptions. In this case, Henry's failure to provide the expected hospitality undermined his symbolic authority, as the inability to host a proper feast was equated with a loss of power. For a high medieval king, whose legitimacy rested on public displays of wealth and largesse, such an omission was both a personal and political crisis.

Henry's demands for extravagant gifts from hosts, treating these demands as obligations, paints a picture of desperation that bordered on exploitation. The royal court's shift from gracious hospitality to coercive demands further eroded its image. By describing the court as akin to Rome's "pursuit of a harlot," Matthew draws attention to the moral and symbolic degradation of the institution of kingship. This rhetoric underscores the extent to which Henry's inability to fulfill the expectations of hospitality diminished his moral and social standing in the eyes of his contemporaries. The example of the king dining with Robert Passelewe, whom he had recently insulted, is particularly pointed. Despite having recently humiliated him, the king still expected

and received lavish gifts, signaling the coercive nature of royal hospitality in this period. However, the transactional nature of these interactions probably alienated the very individuals whose loyalty and support the king needed most. Henry's actions inverted the traditional dynamics of hospitality, reducing it from a display of royal generosity to a reflection of his dependency and financial instability.

The inability to host grand feasts or dinners was not merely a personal failure but a rupture in the social fabric of medieval society. Feasts and dinners were public performances of power, designed to project stability and dominance. When a king or member of the elite failed in this role, it signaled a broader disruption in the social order. The emphasis on the "curtailed" generosity of the royal table highlights how deeply the symbolism of commensality was entrenched in medieval culture. To provide a feast or dinner was to affirm one's position at the top of the hierarchy; to fail was to invite ridicule and diminish one's influence. This dynamic was not limited to kings. Across the social spectrum, the ability to host others was a marker of wealth and influence, while the inability to do so reinforced marginalization. Feasts and dinners created stark contrasts between rich and poor, as the former used hospitality to display dominance and consolidate power, while the latter remained excluded from such opportunities. In this way, hospitality acted as both a status symbol and a mechanism for reinforcing social stratification.

Through the lens of expectation states theory, one can see how the interplay of status and prestige during court feasting and dinners served as a showcase of wealth and hospitality and as a critical mechanism for maintaining and negotiating power dynamics within medieval society. These feasts and dinners exemplified how social interactions were intricately woven into the fabric of community life, illustrating the broader implications of hospitality as a vehicle for social order and the reinforcement of social norms. Applying the expectation states theory to the records of

Matthew Paris suggests that medieval feasts and dinners acted as “social objects” that reflected and reinforced social hierarchies. The theory posits that individuals' perceptions of others influence how they are treated within social groups, creating observable differences in behavior and interaction. At these feasts and dinners, individuals were not just eating, but performing status through manners, behavior, and seating arrangements. The feasts and dinners of wealthy households were carefully organized to reflect social prestige, with a strict order of seating and manners that showcased each person’s social standing. This structure mirrors the idea that people's perceptions of others influence their treatment. Additionally, the behavioral expectations—such as speaking minimally at the table and eating in prescribed ways—demonstrated the “power-prestige order” of the group. These expectations served to delineate the boundaries of acceptable behavior, solidifying social hierarchies. This constant negotiation of status during feasts and dinners, framed within the moral and communal values of the society, highlights how the dining table of the wealthy became a site where social order was both displayed and reproduced. The preparation and execution of feasts and dinners involved significant social maneuvering, where the host’s ability to provide lavish meals and entertainment functioned as a crucial indicator of their social standing. Successful feasts and dinners enhanced the host's prestige, while failures, such as those incurred by Henry III, resulted in public shame and diminished status.

The elaborate food served at elite feasts and dinners was a deliberate display of resources and power, signaling to peers the host's ability to provide opulence. This excessive extravagance aligns with Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis, highlighting how the elite used these displays to showcase wealth, reaffirm social dominance, and gain prestige. When analyzed through expectation states theory, the food served at these feasts and dinners can also be understood as “social objects” that reflected and reinforced power and prestige, shaping the social reality of

interactions within the dining environment. Table manners, meticulously enforced at these gatherings, allowed hosts to wield various forms of social power, particularly authoritative and inductive power. Guests were compelled to adhere to established norms due to the host's inherent authority and the opportunity to gain social prestige for themselves. The strict choreography of feasts and dinners, steeped in long-standing and evolving traditions of hierarchy, functioned as a mechanism of social control. As Durkheim's theory of collective representations suggests, these rituals symbolized and perpetuated the authority of the court and societal structures, using the feast and dinner as a microcosm of the broader social order. The social dynamics of hospitality, as seen in the feasts and dinners of Henry III, also align with the expectation states theory, which posits those individual perceptions within a group influence treatment and behavior, shaping the group's power-prestige order. In this context, feasts and dinners served to reinforce appropriate behavior, ensuring adherence to societal norms and maintaining the collective hierarchy. These theories converge to underscore the central role of socialization in feasting and dining practices. Feasts and dinners acted as arenas for anticipatory socialization, allowing individuals to rehearse and internalize the behaviors required for their future roles. Peer socialization was evident in the collective experience of commensality, where shared practices and traditions fostered solidarity and belonging. Religious socialization is further intertwined with these events through Christian rituals and teachings, reinforcing moral and social values for both hosts and participants. Feasts and dinners were dynamic spaces for negotiating power, status, and identity. They provided structured environments where individuals and groups could assert their social standing while ensuring the perpetuation of key social norms. Through this complex interplay, feasts and dinners became vital cultural events that shaped individual behavior and wider society.

Chapter Three:

Life Milestone Feasts: From Cradle to Grave

Medieval people sought to break up the monotony of daily life through celebrations, making various life events significant societal milestones.[252] Celebrations surrounding major life events such as churching, marriage, and death were marked by feasts that brought together individuals from various social groups, illustrating that food was a universal medium for power and prestige display and norm reinforcement. However, personal celebrations were often limited by financial resources, with wealthier households hosting more elaborate and prestigious feasts, while poorer families engaged in more modest gatherings. Despite the disparity in scale, both the wealthy and the poor typically participated in these rituals, albeit to varying degrees. At these rituals, food served as a tool of socialization and can be understood through anticipatory, peer, and religious socialization processes. Through anticipatory socialization, individuals engaged in feasts and communal meals that mirrored future societal roles and expectations, preparing them for various social duties. Weddings featured grand feasts where power and social prestige were reinforced through wealth displays and the creation and maintenance of social bonds for new couples as they learned how to navigate future social duties. Peer socialization was evident as individuals fostered a new sense of identity and independence distinct from their familial roles through participation in communal eating and festivities. Churching feasts exemplified peer socialization by allowing individuals to engage in communal rituals and interactions that offered the chance to climb the social hierarchy. Religious socialization further underscored the

[252] For an exploration of daily life during the high medieval period, see Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr. *Daily Living in the Twelfth Century, Based on the Observations of Alexander Neckam in London and Paris* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952). For correspondence between people from various social groups that provides insight into everyday life, see Martha Carlin and David Crouch, eds. and trans., *Lost Letters of Medieval Life: English Society, 1200–1250* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

importance of food, as religious ceremonies and rituals involving communal meals reinforced societal norms and values. Although somber, funerals also involved feasting that helped to reinforce community bonds and allowed families to display their status and generosity through church-sanctioned ceremonies. Thus, food was not merely sustenance but a crucial instrument of socialization, intertwining with cultural practices that allowed for grand displays of power and social prestige and the transmission and internalization of societal norms. This chapter will explore the importance of food in medieval English weddings, churching ceremonies, and funerals, highlighting how these distinct events were unified through food and their role in reinforcing power, social prestige, and social norms.

Over the course of the high medieval period, the church increasingly defined and regulated marriage, encouraging public ceremonies. Pope Alexander III (1159-1181) decreed that a valid marriage was one in which "words of the present," [marriage] and/or "words of the future" [betrothal] acting as a promise were spoken, and then the union was consummated.[253] This meant that couples could have a simple ceremony where they would share a kiss and a promise to one another in privacy.[254] The Church referred to such marriages as clandestine, but they were permitted.[255] Later, in the year 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that the ceremony itself needed to be public.[256] While the involvement of the Church was not required, saying vows at the church door was common.[257] The movement of marriage from a private affair to a public one

[253] Gies and Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times*, 177.
[254] Gies and Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times*, 177.
[255] Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450-1500* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 119.
[256] Michael M. Sheehan, "Theory and Practice: Marriage of the Unfree and the Poor in Medieval Society," in *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James K. Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 245.
[257] For a description of a marriage ceremony see Catholic Church, *The Pontifical of Magdalen College, with an Appendix of Extracts from Other English Manuscripts of the Twelfth Century*, ed. H. A. Wilson (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1910), 202.

reflected both the insistence of Gregorian reformers on the indissolubility of marriage and also the increasing recognition of marriage as a sacrament. The definition of marriage as a sacrament meant church courts heard cases relating to marriage; having marriage be public and unambiguous simplified the work of the courts tremendously. The definition of marriage as a sacrament also led to the Church, in 1234, prohibiting weddings during holy seasons such as Advent and Lent, which eliminated a significant part of the year.[258] Peasant weddings in any case were often tied to the agrarian calendar, with weddings typically held during October and November, aligning with butchering and harvest feasts, and the summer harvest months.[259] Ultimately, while their celebrations might be vastly different, changing church definitions of marriage dictated for both the rich and poor how a wedding should be conducted with an increasing focus on the public display of the ceremony.[260]

The role of feasting in marriage celebrations is demonstrated by portrayals of marriage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The depictions of Christ's Miracle of the Marriage Feast of Cana in the Queen Mary Psalter, 1310-1320, portrayed Jesus alongside Mary and others in attendance at the wedding feast including various foodstuffs including fish, fowl, and bread. Various manuscript illustrations also depict the lamb marriage, the marriage of Christ to the church, and, while this is an abstract depiction of a wedding, it still demonstrates the association between feasting and marriage. In a manuscript illustration from the *Anglo-Norman Apocalypse* from

[258] Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families Life in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 204. The Church's restriction on marriages during key liturgical seasons highlights their control over social and familial life, reinforcing their authority over the most important life events.

[259] Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, 204. The timing of weddings was not arbitrary but closely connected to the agrarian calendar. Marrying during times of plenty ensured the availability of resources necessary for a successful feast, which was a critical component of the celebration and a reflection of the couple's social standing.

[260] Sheehan, "Theory and Practice," 245. See the chapters "Choice of Marriage Partner in the Middle Ages," 87–117, and "Theory and Practice," 211–46, for further discussions of the development of the theory of marriage.

Salisbury 1250-1260, Christ is depicted marrying a woman, a representation of the Church, and on the left-hand side of the image a large table covered in various foodstuffs including fish and bread can be seen. Similarly, a manuscript page outlining the rules of consanguinity in marriage, part of a copy of the *Decretum Gratiani* from South East England, 1190-1200, depicts a woman, passing a vessel to a man who holds it with his right hand while grasping a knife in his left; both are seated behind a draped table that holds a cross-inscribed loaf, a bowl of fruit, and a pie-shaped food item. All three depictions demonstrate the close association of food with weddings.

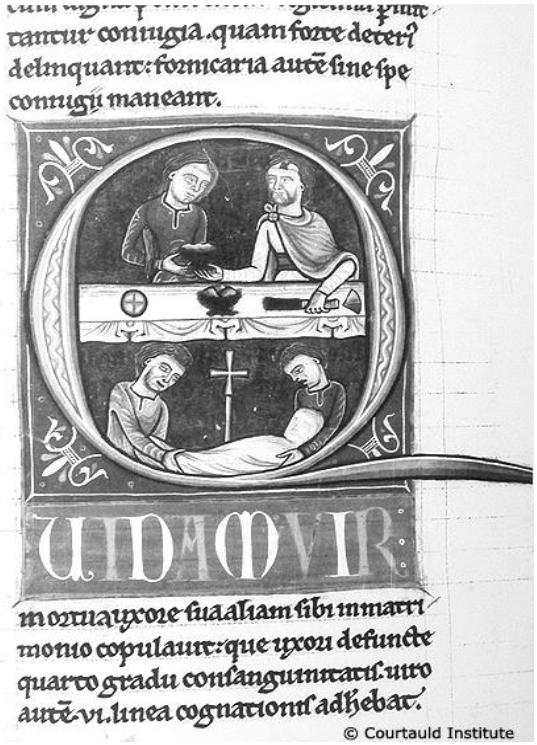
Fig 3. Miracle of Cana

Source: The Marriage at Cana. Queen Mary Psalter, British Library, MS Royal 2 B VII, fol. 168v. Image via Bridgeman Images. Accessed September 22, 2024. https://www.bridgemanimages.com/en-US/english-school/roy-2-b-vii-f-168v-the-marriage-at-cana-from-the-queen-mary-psalter-c-1310-20-vellum/vellum/asset/33663.

Fig 4. Lamb Marriage

Source: Apocalypse: Lamb, Marriage. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 403, fol. 35v. Index of Medieval Art. Accessed September 27, 2024. *https://theindex.princeton.edu/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=A69814EF-A437-45DF-B557-303FFDD6B567.*

Fig 5. Couple Shares a Wedding Meal



Source: Dispute over Incest. Parker Library, MS 10, fol. 326v. Index of Medieval Art. Accessed September 27, 2024. https://theindex.princeton.edu/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=17F722A4-006F-449F-95C0-CD95CDC48300.

The combination of the new emphasis on public marriage ceremonies and increasingly elaborate court culture meant that the thirteenth century saw especially magnificent wedding feasts. For the elite, it was a means to reinforce their social standing. The wedding of King Henry III's brother, Richard of Cornwall, to Sanchia, sister of Henry's queen, Eleanor of Provence, demonstrates the purpose of wealthy wedding feasts. Matthew Paris, in his *Chronica Majora,* details the grand wedding festivities:

> Eodemque anno, die videlicet sancti Clementis, comes Ricardus desponsavit uxorem suam Cinciam, filiam Reimundi comitis Provinciæ, sororem videlicet reginæ, apud Westmonasterium. In cujus nuptiis tanta convivii nuptialis totque convivarum nobilium resplenduit serenitas festivitatis, ut ille incomparabilis apparatus diffusos exigeret tractatus et tædiosos. Sed ut multa brevibus perstringam, in coquinali ministerio plura quam triginta milia ferculorum prandentibus parabantur. Prodigiosaque commenta in præsentia regis

> comitisque novi sponsi, reginæ quoque et sororis suæ dictæ Cinciæ novæ sponsæ, (mutatum nomen ejus, et vocata est Scientia,) comitissæque Provinciæ Beatricis, aliorumque innumerabilium magnatum oculos et cogitatus intuentium in admirationem inauditam rapiebant; sæcularisque pompæ, inanis quoque gloriæ, in joculatorum diversitate, in vestium varietate, cibariorum numerositate, et epulantium populositate, delicias transitorias, contemptibiles, et umbratilem præstigiatorem mundum manifeste comprobabant, cum tanti paratus varietates crastina dies quasi nebulam exsufflavit.[261]
>
> (And in the same year, namely on the day of Saint Clement, Count Richard espoused his wife Cincia, daughter of Raymond, Count of Provence, that is, the sister of the queen, at Westminster. At whose wedding such brilliance of the nuptial feast and of so many noble guests shone forth in the serenity of the festivity, that that incomparable display would demand extensive and wearisome treatises. But so that I may summarize many things in brief, in the kitchen service more than thirty thousand dishes were prepared for those dining. And the prodigious creations, in the presence of the king and of the count, the new groom, and also of the queen and her sister, the said Cincia, the new bride (her name having been changed, and she was called Scientia), and of Beatrice, Countess of Provence, and of countless other nobles, seized the eyes and thoughts of the onlookers into unheard-of astonishment. And of worldly pomp, and also of vain glory, in the diversity of jesters, in the variety of garments, in the abundance of foodstuffs, and the multitude of feasters, clearly proved the delights to be fleeting, contemptible, and the shadowy, illusionistic world of a juggler. Since the next day blew away the varieties of such great preparations as if they were mist.) (translation: author)

The lavishness of Richard and Sanchia's wedding feast, with its staggering 30,000 dishes and dazzling display of wealth, underscores the role of elite weddings as both social performance and political theater in medieval England. Such events were carefully orchestrated to reflect and reinforce the power, alliances, and hierarchical status of the participants. The feast at Westminster was more than a celebration of personal union; it was a deliberate display of England's prominence, attended by kings, queens, and nobility, whose awe-struck reactions, as Matthew Paris recounts, signaled the success of this spectacle. The elaborate preparations and visual splendor served to elevate the couple's status while affirming the authority of Henry III's court on the international stage. Yet, Matthew's narrative also hints at a moral critique, contrasting the fleeting nature of worldly pomp with the enduring values of spiritual humility. By aligning the wedding with the

[261] Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 4: 263.

feast day of St. Clement, the event was imbued with a veneer of religious legitimacy, though the excesses of jesters, food, and finery pointed to the competing demands of secular prestige.

The royal wedding feast of Alexander III, king of Scotland, to Margaret, daughter of Henry III, further highlights the great cost of a wedding feast and the sheer volume of foodstuff present. Planning for the wedding feast began in the summer of 1251, the wedding happening months later in December.[262] By July, numerous animals were purchased and ordered to be pastured until they were to be slaughtered right before the wedding.[263] In August, Geoffrey de Langley, justiciar of the king's forest, was ordered to hunt roughly 200 deer from various forests and salt them to last until the wedding.[264] Later in November, an additional 1,000 deer were ordered.[265] In early August, 25,000 gallons of wine were also ordered .[266] In October, orders were given to the sheriffs of the northern counties to supply various rabbits, hares, hens, game birds, pigs, and boars.[267] The quantities of each animal differ greatly, with 7,000 hens but only 70 boars; however, an additional 100 boars were ordered the following month.[268] Additional foodstuffs such as sugar, almonds, and rice were ordered at the end of November.[269] In December, fish were ordered, which included 60,000 herring (likely salted), 1,000 greenfish (likely unsalted cod), 500 conger eels, and 10,000 haddock.[270] In addition to these saltwater fish, an unknown amount of freshwater fish were ordered from the King's stew pond and were to be kept alive until needed.[271] Venison, as a symbol of elite status, was reserved primarily for the aristocracy and royalty, reflecting the exclusivity of hunting

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[262] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 125.
[263] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 125.
[264] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 125.
[265] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 125.
[266] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 126.
[267] Kay Staniland, "The Nuptials of Alexander III of Scotland and Margaret Plantagenet," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 30 (1986): 29. See page 29 for a chart depicting exact amounts.
[268] Staniland, "The Nuptials of Alexander III," 29.
[269] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 126.
[270] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 125-126.
[271] Hammond, *Food & Feast in Medieval England*, 126.

rights in medieval society. Almonds, often imported, were considered a luxury item, symbolizing wealth and sophistication. The inclusion of these items in such abundance at Alexander III's wedding underscores the deliberate reinforcement of royal prestige through culinary displays. While the entire sum spent on the wedding is unclear, the verifiable amount spent by Henry III amounts to roughly £2,500, a massive sum for the time.[272]

Still, the general cost of a wedding and the wedding feast depended on social status and available funds. Even non-elite members of society might spend a great deal on the feast, at times an amount equal to the dowry.[273] In 1306, the father of Beatrice Helkok paid 20 shillings for her wedding feast, and, while what this was spent on went unrecorded, it illustrates the importance of the feast. [274] This amount was almost equal to the value of the chattels he had given the couple, suggesting that, while still members of the peasantry, they were upper peasantry.[275] However, it is still a far cry from the expenses seen at Alexander III's marriage to Margaret.

The theoretical concept of expectation states proposed by Joseph Berger, Susan J. Rosenholtz, and Morris Zelditch, Jr., provides a lens through which to understand these elaborate preparations and the social dynamics at play. According to their theory, the behaviors and interactions of individuals within a group are influenced by their expectations of each other's status and capabilities.[276] This can lead to observable differences in treatment and opportunities based on perceived social standing. In the context of Alexander III's wedding feast, the immense resources allocated, and the meticulous planning underscore the expectations placed on royalty to display

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[272] Staniland, "The Nuptials of Alexander III," 41.
[273] Leyser, *Medieval Women*, 109.
[274] Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 94.
[275] Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, 94.
[276] Berger, Rosenholtz and Zelditch, "Status Organizing Processes," 481.

their wealth and reinforce their social status. The extravagant preparations and the vast quantities of food served as a public display of power and prestige, aligning with the expectation states theory. These displays were not merely acts of indulgence but were crucial in reinforcing the social hierarchy and the perceived superiority of the elite. This extravagant display was also likely, in part, owing to a desire to display superiority over Scotland and reinforce the status of the English royalty.

The extensive preparations for the feast reflected the collective expectations of what was appropriate for a royal wedding in connection with the growth of court culture, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the political importance of a marriage between nations. The magnitude of the feast was a manifestation of the societal belief that the elite were entitled to, and indeed expected to, demonstrate their status through opulence. This expectation placed immense pressure on royalty to conform to these social norms, ensuring that their actions matched the perceived status. Similarly, the significant disparity in the cost and scale of a peasant wedding feast compared to that of royalty highlights the rigid social structure and the clear demarcation of social hierarchies. The modesty of peasant weddings underscored their lower status, and any deviation from this norm would be viewed as inappropriate or pretentious. The expectation states theory helps to explain how these social norms were perpetuated, with individuals behaving in ways that reinforced their social standing and the existing hierarchy.

The wedding of King Henry III to Eleanor of Provence further exemplifies the power and prestige displays the wealthy engaged in. Various wealth displays surrounded the wedding ceremony such as Henry III providing twelve towns and villas as the dowry, the payment of 10,000 marks to Henry III by Eleanor's father as a marriage portion, and the party of over 300 that

accompanied Eleanor to England for the wedding.[277] Following their wedding, the bridal party went to London, and on January 20th, 1236, Eleanor was crowned Queen.[278] A large feast was held following Eleanor's coronation that acted as both the wedding feast and the coronation feast owing to the haste in which they were married. Matthew Paris described the feast in his *Chronica majora*, questioning the reader as to why he should recount the grand display "Quid in mensa dapium et diversorum libaminum describam fertilitatem redundantem? Venationis abundantiam, piscium varietatem, joculatorum voluptatem, ministrantium venustatem?"[279] (Why should I describe the overflowing richness of dishes and various delicacies on the table? The abundance of game, the variety of fish, the delight of the jesters, the charm of the attendants?) (translation: author)

Again, game would have been limited to elites, and the abundance signified the wealth and power of Henry. While the exact menu of the wedding feast of King Henry III and Eleanor of Provence is unknown, the event itself offers a striking example of how the consumption and display of food and luxury items were used to reinforce social standing. The sheer scale of the event, featuring luxurious goods and an overabundance of food and drink, exemplifies how elite weddings functioned as opportunities for social elites to demonstrate their wealth and power. The wedding/coronation feast gave Henry III a public stage on which he was able to showcase the wealth and power he commanded, projecting his authority through the richness of the event.

Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis is particularly relevant here, as the lavishness of the event, from the abundance of game and fish to the display of fine wines in priceless vessels, was driven by a need to assert and validate social standing. This competition extended beyond the king and

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[277] Margaret Howell, "The Resources of Eleanor of Provence as Queen Consort," *The English Historical Review* 102, no. 403 (1987): 14, 381. David A. Carpenter, *Henry III: The Rise to Power and Personal Rule, 1207-1258*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 176.

[278] Carpenter, *Henry III*, 179.

[279] Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 3: 339.

his court to include the nobility, clergy, and even the citizens of London, who used the feast as a platform to demonstrate their civic pride and affluence. While much of the foodstuff and objects eaten and used by individuals was provided by others, the way they engaged with them elevated the power and prestige of the individual.

The wedding feast of King Henry III to Eleanor of Provence also underscores the broader cultural significance of feasting in medieval society, where the consumption of food was not only a physical act but a symbolic one. The abundance and variety of dishes communicated messages of prosperity, divine favor, and stability, critical in an era when scarcity was a constant threat. Ultimately, this feast, like many others in the medieval period, functioned as a carefully staged performance of power, blending political, social, and cultural elements to reinforce the established hierarchy. Matthew's final note on the celebration underlines this and answers his question to the reader about why he detailed the extravagance of the feast: "Quicquid mundus potuit effundere voluptatis et gloriæ eminus ibi demonstrabat."[280] (Whatever the world could pour forth of pleasure and glory, it displayed there from afar) (translation: author) Its legacy, preserved through Matthew Paris's account, reveals how food and feasting were inextricably linked to medieval power, prestige, and social norms.

The next major life event following marriage, for a couple, was pregnancy and childbirth. While childbirth was celebrated at christenings, churchings saw a continued celebration of the mother and establishment of the child in society. Churching was the ritual purification of new mothers, following a period of seclusion known as lying-in.[281] In the high medieval period, many women engaged in the practice of lying-in, where they would distance themselves from wider

[280] Paris, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 3: 339.

[281] Becky R. Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite: Medieval English Men's Recollections Regarding the Rite of the Purification of Women after Childbirth," *Gender & History*, 14 no.2 (2002): 227.

society following birth.[282] The custom of lying-in originated partly from beliefs about ritual impurity and blood pollution tied to menstruation and childbirth, influenced by Leviticus 12, which prescribed periods of impurity after childbirth.[283] By the twelfth century, Gratian's *Decretum* taught that women should not be excluded from churches unless by choice, an idea supported by Pope Innocent III in the early thirteenth century, though contrary views continued.[284] Still, lying-in and churching remained standard practices for most women.

During the period of lying-in, a woman would be attended to by servants, if elite, and friends until her churching ceremony.[285] This period of seclusion, while typically lasting anywhere from two to six weeks with less or more time possible, relieved the new mother from her usual household and familial duties.[286] Instead, she and her companions, known as gossips, gathered in a specially decorated birthing chamber to support the mother and share special food and drink.[287] Much like the feasts that accompanied numerous other life milestones such as the wedding feast or funeral feast, the sharing of food and drink in the chamber offered women, and their families, an opportunity for social display and another convergence point for hospitality and conviviality. Many women from various wealth groups practiced the lying-in tradition, although the duration, the decoration of the birthing chamber, and the type of refreshments varied according to their financial resources.

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[282] Fiona Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," in *Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Premodern World: European and Middle Eastern Cultures, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Costanza Gislon Dopfel, Alessandra Foscati, and Charles Burnett (Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2019), 236-238.

[283] Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," 230.

[284] Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," 230-231.

[285] Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," 239.

[286] Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," 237.

[287] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 227; Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," 237.

A woman's re-entrance into society was marked by a ritual known as churching. In England, records of churching ceremonies date back to the twelfth century.[288] The ceremony concluded with a feast for parents, relatives, and friends to celebrate the mother's return to the community.[289] Churching feasts first emerged in the thirteenth century in England.[290] These feasts were not small affairs; rather, they were grandiose in nature. The foodstuff present played a major role in how a feast was perceived. A purification feast would consist of the traditional foods present at other medieval feasts, and as with the other feasts, the aim would be to provide guests with high-quality and rare foods in abundance. For purification feasts this was a necessity to ensure it would be remembered by guests in attendance.

The importance of this communal celebration is reiterated through the church feast, Candlemas, occurring on 2 February, to commemorate Mary's churching. Individuals would carry lit candles in a procession to the church.[291] In commemoration of this event, feasts were held. Socially, churching was significant because it served as a rite of re-incorporation. It marked and facilitated the new mother's transition from her period of seclusion after childbirth back into society. It also often marked the birth of an heir, and thus it was the child's future role that occupied the minds of many participating in the feasting, making the event one of remembrance. For the elite, the churching ceremony was viewed to reinforce the family's power and status within a community. However, these feasts also ensured that those in attendance would remember the day so the community could testify to the age of the heir. Efforts would be made to make the ceremony memorable through grand displays of wealth. Therefore, reflections of these churching feasts can

[288] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 227.
[289] Harris-Stoertz, "'Lying-in' in High Medieval England," 243.
[290] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 230.
[291] Gies and Gies, *Daily Life in Medieval Times*, 168.

be found in proof-of-age inquests, legal proceedings done to determine the age of a wealthy heir.[292] This was done as he or she had to be of age before they could take control of familial estates and wealth.[293] While these records focus on the wealthy members of society, they offer insight into wider perceptions of the churching feasts held by both the rich and poor. Two such accounts, from 1309 and 1308 respectively, outline how important it was to the family to ensure individuals remembered an heir's date of birth:

> William de Lyllehon, knight, aged 50, says that the said Peter was 22 on the feast of St. Lawrence last, for he was born at Forstehury on that feast 14 Edw. I. and baptized in the church of St. Michael at Schaldehorne on the morrow, and this he knows because on that feast the said John came to Middletone and asked him to be godfather to the said Peter, which he declined on account of the solemnization on the morrow of the nuptials between his mother and Stephen de Britmerestone (?) at Middletone, and the said John asked him to give testimony of the date of birth of the said heir, and he caused it to be written on the wall of his hall.
>
> John le Dun, knight, aged 57, Nicholas de la Mare, aged 60, William le Chamberleyu, aged 46, Ada (*sic*) de Temesbury, aged 60, John Homedieu, aged 67, William Waryn, aged 40, Peter Olyver, aged 50, William Wolton, aged 48, John Frankelayn, aged 60, Stephen de Perham, aged 46, and John Grygge, aged 60, say the same, and know it because the said John a month after the said feast held a feast at Westeforstebury for the churching of the mother of the heir, at which they were all present, and the said John asked them to give testimony of the day and year of the birth of the said heir.[294]

Evidence of this is further supported by the numerous mentions of these purification feasts in proof of age inquests. In 1296, at the poof of age inquest for Mary, daughter of William de Mohun, a man named John atte Mere testified that she was 14 and that he remembered this because both he and his wife were at her mother's purification feast.[295] In the same year at the proof of age

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[292] Becky R. Lee, "Women Ben Purifyid of her Childeryn: The Purification of Women After Childbirth in Medieval England," (PhD Diss., University of Toronto, 1998), 131.

[293] Lee, "Women Ben Purifyid of Her Childeryn," 131.

[294] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem: And Other Analogous Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office*, vol. 5 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1904), 50, https://archive.org/details/calendarofinquis05grea/page/50/mode/2up?q=forstebury

[295] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem: And Other Analogous Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office*, vol. 3 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1904), 328, https://archive.org/details/calendarofinquis03great/page/n5/mode/2up

inquest for Eleanor, also a daughter of William de Mohun, John de Asshele of Walsheburn, a knight, testified that she was 17 as he remembered attending her mother's purification feast.[296] In 1297 at the proof of age inquest for Alice, daughter of Hugh de Wyndersor, Richard de Ketelbergh testified that she was 16 because he remembered that "he was at the banquet when her mother was purified."[297] In 1300 at the proof of age inquest of Andrew, son of Andrew Saukevill, two individuals testified to attending the purification feast of his mother.[298] In 1304, at the proof of age inquest of John, son of Robert de Stallinge, Robert de Compton, Peter de Acle, John son of William de Acle, and John Bacon all testified to being present at the purification feast of John's mother.[299]

The churching feast served as an event to fix the birth of a child in the minds of many individuals. Therefore, if a feast was not held, the family ran the risk of court disputes over the age of the heir, which could lead to significant issues when it came time to transfer land. Therefore, individuals took great care to ensure the churching feast was memorable. This was achieved through the acquisition of prized foodstuff in great abundance, and careful social interactions at the feast itself. One man testified in an inquisition record that he had gone hunting with the father to acquire venison for the feast. [300] This testimony highlights the dual importance of the churching feast as both a social and economic event. On one hand, it reinforced the symbolic value of the feast in publicizing a child's birth and ensuring legal clarity for inheritance. On the other, it underscored the performative aspect of these events, where the acquisition of prized foods like venison elevated the feast's prestige. This testimony reflects not only the collective memory

[296] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 3: 329.
[297] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 3: 329.
[298] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 3: 329.
[299] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem: And Other Analogous Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office*, vol. 4 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1904), 324, https://archive.org/details/calendarofinquis04grea/page/n5/mode/2up
[300] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 231.

associated with these feasts but also the effort invested in crafting an event that would be both socially significant and legally verifiable. The emphasis on securing high-status food and fostering shared experiences further demonstrates how these feasts intertwined familial responsibilities with broader social obligations, ensuring that such events were memorable for witnesses who might later provide crucial testimony.

Testimonies found in proofs-of-age inquiries indicate that purification feasts were organized and overseen by the father. The testimony of a man from Devon reiterates the active role the father took in planning the churching feast. He claimed that the father oversaw invitations and personally invited him to the feast, the task of inviting guests to the feast, usually significant members of the community, being the job of the father.[301] Churching feasts provided the father with an opportunity to reinforce and elevate his social and economic standing through displays of wealth and generosity. The father could further reinforce and or elevate his social standing by controlling who attended the feast. By carefully selecting the invitees, the father could establish, reaffirm, or renegotiate his relationships within the community.[302]

While the churching ceremony, conducted in the parish church, was a public event open to all, the celebratory feast appears to have been more exclusive. The father of the heir would aim to include prominent men in his community. While it is difficult to determine the exact makeup of these gatherings, the characterization of the guests at the purification feast hosted by John de Grey of Oxford in 1300, which included abbots, priors, and nearly all the reputable men of the region, indicates that the invitees were likely of equal or higher status than the host.[303] Whom the father chose to exclude from the feast was also an important social aspect of the celebration and impacted

[301] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 5: 53.
[302] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 232.
[303] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 232.

social interactions. One man, twenty-one years later, testified in 1286 about the age of an heir: "William de la Haye, aged 48, agrees, and knows it [the year the heir was born] because on the day that the said Maud was purified the said Robert made a feast for all his neighbours, but did not invite him, at which he was angry."[304] Individuals were compelled by societal expectations to behave according to their social rank, as status and power, while gained through wealth and lineage, were upheld through lifestyle choices and social connections. Therefore, a father would take great care to distinguish the guests in attendance specially. In the context of churching ceremonies, this desire to display wealth and compete socially can be clearly observed.

At the churching feast, men engaged in various forms of socialization, often intending to increase their power and prestige within the community. The communal gathering allowed men, from various socio-economic backgrounds, to interact.[305] Business transactions often occurred and were a common activity during churching feasts.[306] Regardless of who initiated the business transaction, it offered an opportunity to create and legitimize new and distinct bonds between people of different economic status.[307] Therefore, the inclusion and or exclusion from these feasts had serious ramifications for an individual's social standing. Women also attended these feasts as guests. Proof of age inquests reveal that many women attended these events both alongside their husbands and alone, as widows or accompanied by trusted men.[308] While the types of socialization they engaged in are not prominent in records, their presence was important, and they likely engaged in similar behaviour as in the lying-in period.

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[304] Great Britain Public Record Office, *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, vol. 4: 224.
[305] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 229.
[306] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 229.
[307] Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite," 229.
[308] Lee, "Women Ben Purifyid of Her Childeryn," 139.

At these feasts, numerous complex interactions can be found occurring between participants. While the feast represented the social integration of the mother back into society it was a process driven by men, unlike childbirth and the rituals surrounding lying-in. Testimonies found in proofs-of-age inquiries emphasize the father's role in organizing purification feasts, reflecting the patriarchal structure of medieval society.[309] However, the reliance on such records risks marginalizing women's potential contributions to these events, which may have been significant but less formally documented. it is crucial to recognize that while the father's role dominated the narrative preserved in legal records, this does not negate the potential influence or contributions of women. The focus on male actions in these sources reflects the biases of the time and the priorities of the legal system, which valued male witnesses and inheritance-related

[309] Scholars have traditionally focused on the misogynistic elements of the churching ritual, portraying it as a reflection of societal fears regarding women's sexual and reproductive roles and a mechanism for male dominance. Edward Shorter, in *A History of Women's Bodies*, argues that the churching rite offers "the most consistent evidence of a male disposition to believe women's bodies dangerous to society." (See Edward Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1982), 289.) According to Shorter, by participating in churching, women implicitly accepted and perpetuated the prevailing view that they were "poisonous, diseased, and inferior," thus reinforcing their subordinate status within the patriarchal order. (See Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies*, 285.) However, more recent scholarship, such as "*A Company of Women and Men's Recollections of Childbirth in Medieval England*" by Becky Lee, offers a more nuanced interpretation of churching, one that considers the interaction between birthing practices and broader social dynamics. Rather than solely emphasizing the ecclesiastical control of women, Lee highlights the ways in which the events of the birthing chamber and churching rites were interwoven with the lives of men, particularly in the context of manorial society. Although men seldom entered the birthing chamber physically, their dynastic interests and social politics regularly permeated its boundaries, blurring the line between private and public spheres, as well as between male and female spaces. Lee's analysis of proof-of-age inquests suggests that men were not entirely excluded from the events in the birthing chamber, as their recollections demonstrate an awareness of, and involvement in, the lives of the women present. The inquests reveal that, from the perspective of the men, both men and women surrounded and supported the puerperal woman, challenging the traditional view of the birthing chamber as an exclusively female domain. This perspective complicates earlier interpretations by suggesting that male concerns over lineage and status brought them into indirect but significant contact with women's reproductive experiences. The historiographical debates surrounding churching reflect a broader tension between interpretations focused on male dominance and those that explore more complex social dynamics. Edward Shorter represents a common view that emphasizes the churching rite as an instrument of patriarchal control, highlighting how it reinforced misogynistic beliefs about women's bodies and their supposed dangers to society. In contrast, Lee challenges this perspective by exploring how men were indirectly involved in the birthing process, arguing that the boundary between male and female spaces was more fluid than previously thought. This shift from a strictly oppressive reading to one that considers the interconnectedness of gendered spaces reveals a growing trend in scholarship to reexamine women's roles in medieval rituals through a more nuanced lens, considering both agency and the complex social contexts in which these rituals unfolded.

concerns. Women's perspectives, though less visible, likely shaped these events in significant ways, particularly through their involvement in the lying-in period and their role as the central figure in the churching ritual itself. By examining both sides of the dynamic—male-driven organization and the female experience, the multifaceted nature of churching feasts is revealed. While they reinforced patriarchal authority and societal norms, they also provided women with moments of celebration and community that were integral to their social and emotional reintegration after childbirth. These rituals encapsulate the broader tensions of medieval gender roles, where moments of female agency coexisted with, and were often subsumed by, male-dominated societal structures.

Churching feasts, characterized by abundance and conviviality, embodied Émile Durkheim's theory of collective representations, where shared beliefs, values, and symbols shape social reality. Bread, meat, ale, and wine at these feasts symbolized communal values, reinforcing social hierarchies, gender roles, and cohesion. Beyond sustenance, these events upheld the collective conscience, binding society through shared norms. Lavish foods like venison and wine highlighted status and power, with the host—often the father of the newborn—asserting authority through hospitality and wealth. These feasts expressed collective solidarity, affirming beliefs about family, childbirth, and hierarchy while maintaining social order.

Analyzed through Ledyaev's power framework, churching feasts also asserted dominance and reinforced hierarchies. Persuasive power was displayed through the host's wealth and generosity, subtly compelling guests to recognize their position. Inductive power operated as rare and luxurious foods enticed participation, creating a system of social exchange where generosity was met with recognition of authority. Authoritative power, rooted in patriarchal and religious norms, legitimized the male host's role in mediating between domestic and communal spheres.

The churching ritual, marking a woman's reintegration into society after childbirth, underscored gendered power dynamics, framing her role within prescribed social and religious expectations. These feasts thus functioned as ritualized affirmations of authority, sustaining patriarchal and ecclesiastical order.

While food played a key role in feasts commemorating the new start to both relationships and life, it also played a key role in death commemoration. While the process of death and funerals was largely the same regardless of wealth or social status, the differences can be found in the extravagance of the affair's accouterments, including foodstuff. A central element of funerals was the dole, the distribution of bread to the poor. Charity was seen as an admirable practice and many individuals ensured it occurred at their funerals for the social prestige it would bring. However, these doles also acted as a reward for the poor who followed the bier of a wealthy or powerful personage to pray for their soul.[310] In this period purgatory was becoming doctrine.[311] Medieval populations believed that souls would eventually transition from purgatory to heaven and the process could be sped up if the living prayed for them.[312] Prayers for specific souls were believed to be more powerful than general prayers.[313] Therefore, individuals ensured that, through the charity given to the poor, their time in purgatory would be reduced.

While food typically served as the primary form of assistance provided to the poor during funerals, money was sometimes utilized, particularly when large crowds were expected. This was the case at the funeral of Richard Gravesend, Bishop of London, in 1303, where the executors

[310] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 145.
[311] Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550* (London: Routledge, 1997), 11.
[312] Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550*, 12.
[313] Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550*, 12-13.

made a cash distribution totaling £133 4s.[314] The significant sum distributed suggests a considerable turnout, with an estimated one third of London's population—approximately 31,968 individuals, each receiving a penny—present at the event.[315]

The presence of numerous poor at funerals was a result of the belief in the spiritual power of their prayers. However, the presence of large numbers of poor also symbolized the deceased's social status, with food playing a central role in these displays. Wealthier individuals could afford to host larger gatherings with more mourners and clergy present, reinforcing their high status through the elaborate provision of food and drink. The expectation was that higher-status individuals would not only attract a larger and more distinguished turnout but also offer grander feasts, symbolizing their importance and influence within the community. Food served as a tangible marker of wealth and generosity, with the quality, quantity, and diversity of offerings reflecting the social standing of the deceased and their family. This practice highlighted the social expectation that wealth and power should be visibly demonstrated, even in death, through the generous distribution of sustenance. Higher-status individuals were expected to provide more substantial and varied food alms, thereby ensuring the salvation of their souls through prayers. This practice also ensured that, through the grand displays at the feast, their legacy was upheld and remembered by the guests in attendance. The grandeur of the food alms, whether in the form of lavish feasts for the mourners or bread and ale distributed to the poor, reflected the societal expectation that the deceased's wealth and generosity would translate into a significant spiritual and social legacy. The choice of food itself further underscored this dynamic. While staples like bread and ale were common, wealthier funerals often included delicacies such as meats, wine, and

[314] Christopher Woolgar, "Eating, Drinking and the Dead in Late Medieval England," In *Leidschrift* 34, no. 2 (2019): 43.

[315] Woolgar, "Eating, Drinking and the Dead in Late Medieval England," 43.

other luxury items, signaling the deceased's ability to command resources even in death. This reinforced the idea that higher social status warranted greater spiritual intercession and public acknowledgment, with food serving as the medium through which these expectations were realized. The conspicuous consumption of food at funerals not only honored the deceased but also reaffirmed the family's position in the social hierarchy, ensuring their influence and memory would endure.

It also reflected the expectation that wealthier individuals would engage in more significant charitable acts, ensuring their remembrance and social prestige. The higher the social rank, the more elaborate the charitable provisions. Durkheim posits that collective representations foster social cohesion by promoting shared values and moral norms.[316] The emphasis on charitable giving in wills reflects a collective commitment to caring for the less fortunate and upholding principles of compassion and generosity within the community. These acts of charity served to strengthen social bonds and reinforce a sense of collective identity among members of medieval society. Acts of charity, particularly the provision of food and drink for the poor in wills, exemplified collective solidarity and communal values within medieval society, illustrating the interconnectedness of food practices and social dynamics.

Following the funeral ceremony, a feast was commonly held by those who could afford it. The scale of high medieval funeral feasts can be discerned from the expenditure on food. The grandeur of the spectacle indicated the societal status, whether genuine or desired, of the departed and their kin.[317] The funeral of William de Brembleschote, a member of the Hampshire gentry who

[316] Pickering, *Durkheim and Representations*, 16-17.
[317] Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550*, 56.

died in 1310, reflects the sums spent on funeral feasts: “his goods were worth some £53 15s. 9d. The costs of the funeral feast itself were at least £5 4s. 8¼d, about 10% of the deceased’s goods.”[318]

An estimate of the attendance for this funeral feast can be derived from the expenditure on various foodstuffs. Assuming that each attendee received the equivalent of a penny loaf, the costs suggest that at least 554 loaves were distributed.[319] For more substantial foodstuffs, the records indicate that one and a half beef carcasses were consumed, totaling 480 portions.[320] Regarding beverages, 17s. worth of cider—approximately 357 gallons—was provided, in addition to ale from the household's own reserves, and 2s. 8d. worth of wine, typically reserved for esteemed guests.[321] This large amount of alcohol also points to the likelihood that guests numbered 500 or more.

The lavish quantities of food and drink provided at William de Brembleschote's funeral serve as a demonstration of power and prestige within the context of high medieval society. By allocating significant resources towards hosting such a grand feast, the deceased and their family showcased their power and social status to the community. The abundance of food, including cider, ale, wine, and beef, symbolized not only the generosity of the host but also their ability to command resources and provide for many guests. Furthermore, the presence of both elite and common attendees at the feast underscores the deceased's influence across social strata, reinforcing their position of authority within the community. Thus, the funeral feast becomes a tangible

[318] Woolgar, “Eating, Drinking and the Dead in Late Medieval England,” 42. Additionally, there was a subsequent charge on the executors for the anniversary feast, totaling 8s. 5d., which accounted for just under 1% of the estate's value.

[319] Woolgar, “Eating, Drinking and the Dead in Late Medieval England,” 43.

[320] Woolgar, “Eating, Drinking and the Dead in Late Medieval England,” 43. The customary butchery of beef carcasses in later medieval times typically yielded 320 portions per carcass. Moreover, it's plausible that additional attendees may have received a reduced share.

[321] Woolgar, “Eating, Drinking and the Dead in Late Medieval England,” 43. It is worth noting that many of the attendees, particularly those consuming cider and ale, were likely from the peasantry

manifestation of the deceased's power and prestige, leaving a lasting impression on those in attendance.

By investing heavily in the funeral feast, families were able to showcase their ability to mobilize and allocate resources, thus affirming their high social status. The grand scale of the funeral feast for William de Brembleschote, involving over 500 attendees, illustrates the authority and influence wielded by the deceased and his family. The distribution of substantial quantities of food and drink to both elite and common attendees reinforced the deceased's position of power within the social hierarchy. This act of generosity and provision was not merely about hospitality but was a strategic display of authority that ensured the deceased's legacy and social standing would be remembered and respected. The dead and their families fought against any concept of death as a great equalizer. A funeral was used by medieval populations to judge a person, whether a poor peasant or a rich noble.[322] Community members judged the quantity and quality of goods provided around a funeral and, in turn, judged the social standing of the deceased and his/her surviving family accordingly.[323]

The executors of wills adhered to a commonly expected pattern, guided by what they deemed suitable for a person of elevated status, thereby reflecting the enduring influence and social prestige of the deceased even after their passing. For instance, the executors of Richard Gravesend, Bishop of London, who died in 1303 authorized the following purchase of foodstuff for the funeral feast, “Item in cygnis, gallinis et cuniculis empties pro convivio facto die sepulture xiij li. Xix s. vj d. Item solute cuidam ypothecario pro croco gingiberi sucro et aliis specicbus ad eo empties pro

[322] Mason, *Food and the Rites of Passage*, 87.
[323] Mason, *Food and the Rites of Passage*, 87.

convivantibus eodem die super expensus defuncti iv li. Xvij s."[324] (Item, for swans, chickens, and rabbits purchased for the feast held on the day of the burial: £13, 19 shillings, and 6 pence. Item, paid to a certain apothecary for saffron, ginger, sugar, and other spices bought by him for those feasting on the same day, charged to the expenses of the deceased: £4, 17 shillings.) (translation: author) The executors also mention that "Panis, cervisia, vinum, carnes grosse, et alia necessaria fuerunt de stauro defuncti dicta die expensa, et ideo non appretiabantur in Inventario, quod post sepulturam defuncti fuit factum."[325] (Bread, beer, wine, coarse meats, and other necessities were taken from the deceased's stores and consumed on the said day, and therefore were not appraised in the inventory, which was made after the burial of the deceased.) (translation: author) This account underscores how the authority and social standing of individuals persisted beyond death, shaping the arrangements made for their funerals and reinforcing their status within society. The lavishness of funeral arrangements was a direct reflection of one's social rank. The acquisition of prestigious foodstuffs like swans and spices would have been a direct reflection of the wealth and power of the deceased Bishop. These grand feasts served to showcase wealth and reinforce the social hierarchy, ensuring that the deceased's status was publicly acknowledged and maintained.

Many individuals wanted to ensure that a proper funeral and funeral feast would be held for them as funerals were one of the largest costs for individuals and their families.[326] Maintenance contracts and wills ensured that individuals would receive proper care and funeral rites, reflecting their social status. A maintenance agreement from 1305-1306 details the obligation of a new tenant

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[324] Henry Thomas Ellacombe and William Hale, *Account of the Executors of Richard, Bishop of London, 1303, and of the Executors of Thomas, Bishop of Exeter, 1310* (Westminster: Printed for the Camden Society, 1874), 100.

[325] Ellacombe and Hale, *Account of the Executors of Richard, Bishop of London*, 100.

[326] Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, 240. As heriot, the best animal owned by the individual went to the lord of the manor and the second-best animal would then be given to the Church. These costs were in addition to the funeral procession and the ceremonial feasting and drinking with the community.

to pay "20s. to cover burial and funeral expenses," should the old tenant die first they do.[327] While foodstuff is not directly mentioned, it is an implied aspect of funeral expenses. The inclusion of foodstuffs as an implied expense in funeral rites underscores the essential role of food in marking significant social and cultural milestones in medieval society. Feasting, particularly at funerals, went beyond sustenance, serving as a communal ritual that reinforced social bonds, expressed hospitality and reflected the deceased's social standing. Funeral feasts often involved considerable planning and expense, as they were a demonstration of the family's ability to honor the deceased while fulfilling societal expectations.

Those with the means organized similar feast and charitable distributions in the following years, coinciding with the annual memorial mass commemorating the anniversary of their passing.[328] Wealthier households could spend huge sums on death anniversary celebrations. In 1297, Joan de Valence, the wife of Henry III's half-brother, hosted a large feast in London to commemorate the anniversary of her husband's death.[329] Guests ranged from the new Bishop of St David's, David Martain, to her son-in-law.[330] While the cost of the feast in its entirety was not recorded, "the pantry account for the day has 26s. 6d. worth of expenditure, sufficient for about 460 people," indicating that the cost for the entire feast would have been substantial.[331] The death anniversary reflects a trend of spending huge sums on communal feasting associated with funeral feasts. The scale and grandeur of these events set by wealthy households probably created a sense of obligation or expectation for others to uphold similar standards of commemoration, thereby

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[327] Elaine Clark, "Some Aspects of Social Security in Medieval England," *Journal of Family History* 7, no. 4 (1982): 317-18.

[328] Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, 155.

[329] Christopher Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 107.

[330] Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England*, 107.

[331] Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England*, 107.

indirectly influencing social behavior and norms. This subtle form of coercion reinforces the authority and influence of the deceased and their families over communal practices and traditions.

In addition to the anniversary feast, much like at the original funeral feast, provisions were made in wills to ensure future gifts of food to the poor on the day of death and anniversaries. For the death anniversary, almsgiving remained a prominent feature of death and remembrance. The costs varied greatly, ranging from 1s. to £3, but in wealthier cases the almsgiving could make up half of the total expenses.[332] Cardinal Hugh of Evesham stipulated in his will dated November 15, 1286, that £20 be allocated for purchasing grain to bake bread for the poor on the day of his death.[333] However, the alms giving did not end there. Additionally, he designated 10 marks for the same purpose on the first anniversary of his death.[334] Furthermore, £40 was to be utilized for procuring corn to produce bread for distribution among the needy in the Vale of Evesham, while £1 was allocated for a similar cause in Lidlington, Bedfordshire.[335]

Examining funeral feasts and food charity through the lens of Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis allows for an understanding of the lavish spending that took place. As discussed elsewhere, Wagner posits that the human desire to show off through acts of display can outweigh rational considerations.[336] The funeral feast and charity surrounding it were part of the wider great displays of the deceased after death and carried a heavy social weight for their families. The food rituals associated with death were not just a personal or familial act, but a public declaration of the family's status and adherence to social norms. The elaborate funeral feast acted as a powerful symbol of social validation. The lavishness of funeral feasts played a role in the continual assertion of social

[332] Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550*, 63.
[333] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 16.
[334] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 16.
[335] Woolgar, "Gifts of Food in Late Medieval England," 16.
[336] Wagner, *Showing Off*, 12.

status. The large quantities of food and drink, particularly items that were symbolic of wealth—such as swan and large amounts of ale and wine—demonstrate how funerals became spectacles of competitive consumption. The inclusion of foodstuff associated with wealth and power was a deliberate act of conspicuous consumption that underlined the exclusivity of high social rank. For the medieval elite, the more extravagant the feast, the more it affirmed the family's or the deceased's power and prestige. As Wagner suggests, status must be actively demonstrated, and the sheer scale of these feasts served to differentiate the rich from the poor.

The public nature of the funeral feast continued through the distribution of food and money to the poor during funerals. Charity, and the prayers that come from it, were steeped in important religious connotations for the salvation of the soul. However, it was not merely an act of charity but a public performance that reinforced the deceased's social standing. Individuals from every economic background attempted to leave foodstuff, or money to purchase it, for the poor, even when this could be extremely costly. This aligns with Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis, which asserts status is not fixed but performed through outward signs of power and recognition by others. The larger the crowd of mourners or recipients of charity, the greater the deceased's perceived status, as their generosity not only benefited the poor but showcased their capacity to command significant resources and recognition. Therefore, individuals might be impelled to spend significant amounts of money, even outside of their means, to achieve this status recognition.

While the life events surrounding each type of feast were remarkably different and complex in their social interaction, food played a central role in each and facilitated socialization. The analysis of medieval English wedding, churching, and funeral feasts reveals the pivotal role of food as a tool of socialization in displays of power, prestige, and reinforcement of societal norms. These feasts were not merely indulgent celebrations but were deeply embedded in the social fabric

of society, serving as critical mechanisms for maintaining and expressing social hierarchies and communal values.

The elaborate preparations and public displays of opulence at royal weddings and funeral feasts underscored the expectation for the elite to demonstrate their status through grandeur, aligning with the expectation states theory and Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis. Churching feasts celebrated a woman's return to society after childbirth and were significant social events in medieval England. Lavish displays of food and drink, often reflective of the family's wealth, were central to these feasts. The provision of sumptuous meals and the inclusion of significant community members served to reinforce social hierarchies and the host's status. Theoretical frameworks such as Ledyaev's concepts of persuasive, inductive, and authoritative power, as well as the idea of collective representations, illustrate that these feasts functioned as mechanisms of social control and reinforcement of communal bonds. By demonstrating wealth and generosity, hosts subtly influenced social perceptions and ensured adherence to societal norms, thereby maintaining social cohesion and reinforcing the collective values of the community. Medieval funeral practices, particularly the provision of food and drink, played a crucial role in socialization and the reinforcement of societal norms. The lavishness of funeral feasts and the distribution of food underscored social hierarchies and reflected the deceased's status and influence. Theoretical frameworks such as Durkheim's collective representations and Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis illuminate how these practices fostered collective identity and legitimized social rank. By ensuring that mourners, particularly the poor, were well-fed, the deceased's family publicly declared their adherence to communal values and their social standing. This intersection of charity and conspicuous consumption at funerals reinforced social cohesion and the continuity of social structures, demonstrating the deep interconnection between food practices and social dynamics in

medieval society. Thus, food and feasting functioned as essential tools for socialization by allowing for power and prestige displays that aided in the reinforcement of social norms.

Conclusion

The feasting and fasting practices of high medieval England, from the Norman Conquest of 1066 to the eve of the Great Famine in 1315, served as socialization events through displays of power, social prestige, and social norms. Across religious, life-cycle, and courtly contexts, participation in food rituals served as a medium through which power was asserted, social prestige was garnered, and social norms were performed and maintained. Feasts and fasts functioned as structured mechanisms of socialization, reinforcing power, prestige, and social norms through collective participation in food rituals. Anticipatory socialization was evident as individuals rehearsed behaviors tied to their social roles, learning the expectations associated with hosting, attending, or participating in communal meals. Peer socialization occurred as attendees engaged in ritualized interactions, observing and replicating behaviors that reinforced communal identity and hierarchical relationships. Religious socialization was deeply embedded in these events, as fasting and feasting were structured around Christian doctrine, linking self-restraint, generosity, and hospitality to spiritual virtue. Through these processes, feasting and fasting ritualized social order, ensuring that individuals internalized the customs and behaviors necessary to maintain societal cohesion while reinforcing shared values and collective identity.

The theoretical frameworks of Ledyaev, Wagner, Durkheim, and the expectation states theory proposed by Joseph Berger, Susan J. Rosenholtz, and Morris Zelditch, Jr. are essential to understanding the functions of these food rituals. Feasts and fasts, and the food presented and consumed at them, can be understood as expressions of persuasive, inductive, and authoritative power as defined by Ledyaev. Persuasive power operates through symbolic influence, as hosts and religious authorities shape behaviors and expectations without direct coercion, whether by framing fasting as a path to spiritual purity or feasting as a demonstration of generosity and status. Inductive

power is evident in the way food functions as a social currency, with hosts securing loyalty and prestige through lavish banquets and the strategic distribution of food-based charity. Authoritative power, meanwhile, is embedded in the ritual structures of both fasting and feasting, where individuals conform to expectations not merely out of obligation but because the social and religious hierarchy legitimizes these practices as inherently binding. Wagner's *Geltung* hypothesis highlights how feasts were structured performances of prestige, where the ability to host elaborate banquets served as a marker of social standing, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions. Likewise, Durkheim's theory of collective representations demonstrates how fasting and feasting were symbolic acts that fostered group cohesion and reinforced moral expectations, embedding individuals within shared religious and social traditions. Expectation states theory, as developed by Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch, explains how these food rituals functioned as arenas of socialization, where perceptions of power and status influenced interpersonal dynamics. Through feasting, individuals rehearsed and internalized status-based expectations, learning how to navigate elite networks, while fasting reinforced communal identity and moral discipline, shaping how individuals conformed to religious and societal norms. Together, these theories illustrate that food rituals were not merely acts of consumption but structured mechanisms of socialization where food served as a tool for identity formation.

Chapter One examined the explicitly religious dimensions of fasting and feasting among monastic, ecclesiastical, and lay communities, demonstrating that food practices were deeply embedded in religious doctrine, monastic regulations, and broader social expectations. The impact of the Norman Conquest and continental reform movements reshaped English monastic food culture, particularly in Benedictine, Cistercian, and Carthusian communities, where strict fasting regulations reinforced both spiritual discipline and social distinction. However, fasting was not

limited to monasteries; it extended into clerical and lay society, where observance of the liturgical calendar and communal fasts reinforced Christian identity. In contrast, feasting on major Christian holidays was an opportunity for lavish displays of generosity, hierarchy, and collective belonging, uniting different social groups while reaffirming distinctions between them. The interplay between fasting and feasting thus functioned as a regulating force, ensuring that indulgence was counterbalanced by restraint and reinforcing both social and moral order. This discussion underscored that participation in religious feasts was not merely an act of faith, but a process of learning and reinforcing societal roles through food-based socialization.

Chapter Two explored feasting and dining in the royal court, where food was not merely sustenance but an instrument of diplomacy, political maneuvering, and cultural refinement. The rise of courtly culture in the high medieval period transformed feasting and dining into a highly regulated and performative practice, where elaborate meals, symbolic foodstuffs, and strict etiquette reinforced hierarchical distinctions. Feasting and dinners in this context were deeply ritualized, with seating arrangements, table manners, and controlled access to elite foods functioning as mechanisms of power and social stratification. As such, these feasts and dinners became key areas where individuals navigated and recognized relationships within the aristocratic and royal spheres.

Chapter Three shifted to feasts associated with life-cycle events, analyzing birth, marriage, and death as key moments of socialization through displays of power, prestige, and social norms. Wedding feasts were a performance of wealth and lineage, with the quality and quantity of food serving as a visible assertion of power and economic standing. Churching feasts, while celebratory, also reinforced lineage and inheritance, tying opulent food rituals to the recognition of a child's birth and thus the family's social power and prestige. Funeral feasts, while framed as acts of charity

and commemoration, served as occasions for dynastic assertion and economic patronage, ensuring that the deceased's legacy endured through public displays of wealth. In each case, feasts surrounding life milestones provided structured spaces for social interaction, where individuals navigated power relations, established reputations and reinforced cultural norms through food rituals.

Despite the contextual differences between religious, courtly, and life-cycle food rituals all of these practices were fundamentally linked by their ability to express and reinforce power, prestige, and social norms. Food was a language of social control, shaping relationships between individuals and broader institutions. This thesis offers a historiographically innovative approach to the study of food in medieval England by positioning feasting and fasting as structured mechanisms of socialization rather than simply reflections of wealth, status, or religious observance. While scholars such as Christopher Woolgar and Bridget Ann Henisch have explored medieval food culture in relation to daily life, hospitality, and elite identity, they have not explicitly examined food as a tool of socialization that actively shaped individual behaviors and reinforced societal norms. Additionally, most existing studies of English food culture span broad periods or emphasize the later medieval era, particularly after the Great Famine and the Black Death. This thesis, by contrast, has focused on the high medieval period (1066–1315), a period that saw the institutionalization of feasting and fasting practices within evolving feudal, religious, and courtly structures. By integrating the theoretical frameworks of Ledyaev, Wagner, Berger et al., and Durkheim, this study moves beyond descriptive analyses of medieval food consumption to uncover the power dynamics, social expectations, and mechanisms of identity formation embedded within food rituals. In doing so, it reframes medieval feasting and fasting as active processes that structured social hierarchies, transmitted cultural values, and reinforced collective identities,

offering new insights into the intersection of food, power, and social cohesion in high-medieval England.

While this thesis has provided a comprehensive analysis of medieval feasting practices through the lens of socialization and the resulting displays of power dynamics, social prestige, and social norms, several areas remain ripe for further exploration. One such area is the role of women in these feasts. Although this thesis suggests that women participated in various feasts, a more in-depth study could be conducted to determine how women navigated these spaces, and the extent to which they exercised agency within this heavily male-dominated society. Another area for further study is the comparison of feasting practices in England to practices across Europe. While this thesis has focused on England, similar feasting practices existed across Europe, and a comparative analysis could reveal regional variations in the use of food as a tool of socialization.

In conclusion, the food rituals of High-Medieval England served as vital spaces for the reinforcement of social hierarchies, power dynamics, and communal identities. Through the application of the theoretical frameworks of Ledyaev, Wagner, Durkheim, and the expectation states theory, this thesis has demonstrated how these rituals functioned as more than just meals; they were complex social performances. Food rituals were a key tool in the socialization process, embedding individuals within the moral and social order of their communities. Further study in these areas will only deepen our understanding of the intricate social fabric of medieval society.

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