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1

Introduction

C. M. WOOLGAR, D. SERJEANTSON, AND T. WALDRON

Food and diet are rightly popular areas of research, central to understanding daily life in the Middle Ages. In the past twenty years their study has changed a great deal and a multi-disciplinary approach has become essential to encompass the historical, archaeological, and scientific record. During this time, historians have opened up sources in new ways; zooarchaeologists and archaeobotanists have processed and assimilated archaeological material from a wide range of sites; and scientific techniques, applied to the medieval period, have begun to allow an assessment of the cumulative impact of diet on the human skeleton. Nonetheless, the wide variety of information about diet and nutrition has rarely been drawn together. Even for a single country this project is a daunting task, yet it is one that is crucial to establishing how much more is now known about changes in patterns of eating, the general levels of nutrition and the consequences for health and life expectancy. This is the first ambition of this volume. At the same time, the interchange between the methodological approaches of historians and archaeologists has produced important developments and is equally central to this book. Looking at both strands together, we can reassess the state of our knowledge of this complex subject and see where deficiencies lie in our approaches, planning research accordingly.

To this end, the text brings together much original and unpublished research, marrying historical and archaeological approaches with analyses from a range of archaeological disciplines including archaeobotany, archaeozoology, osteoarchaeology, and isotopic studies. The volume covers the whole of the Middle Ages from the Early Saxon period up to *c.*1540. Inevitably, the greatest contribution to the period before 1066 has come from archaeology, while the emphasis for the historical essays lies in the period between 1066 and the Reformation. From the eleventh century onwards, the contributions of the historians and archaeologists complement each other. While the focus of the volume is England (Fig. 1.1), reference is made to wider European developments, although research in comparable depth is not available for many parts of the Continent.



Fig. 1.1 Map of England showing selected places referred to in the text

The contributors to this volume are members of an informal group of historians, archaeologists, and archaeological scientists, the Diet Group, which has met in Oxford over the last decade to pursue the study of food, diet, consumption, and health in the past. The different disciplines not only bring different kinds of data, but also different approaches and styles of scholarship and presentation. A combination of these is now a virtue essential to the achievement of a holistic view of this subject.

The study of medieval food and diet

Food has been perennially of interest in the study of the Middle Ages, but the context of that research has changed. Its presence in the collections of recipes and descriptions of banquets, prominent in the works of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquaries, is markedly different in emphasis from its place in the discussion of living standards, prices, and wages of twentieth-century social and economic history and in the great regional studies of the 1950s and 1960s that considered the nutrition, calorific intake, and the vulnerability of populations to starvation. In England, the survival of large numbers of documents for the administration of landed estates (or manors) from the thirteenth century onwards has led to a concentration on production in medieval agriculture, rather than the consumption of food; but in the last two decades there has been a significant change in perspective. Outlines of diet in late medieval England were succinctly mapped by Christopher Dyer;¹ detailed studies, such as Barbara Harvey's work on the monks of Westminster, have shown the rich potential of monastic sources;² work on large numbers of manorial accounts has produced new conclusions about regional patterns of production, marketing, and consumption;³ and new examinations of sources, such as household accounts, have broadened the material available for the study of diet.⁴ Alongside conclusions from much other work, it is now possible, from historical sources, to make a wide range of statements about consumption.

The analysis of archaeological plant and animal remains with a view to demonstrating food production and consumption was almost unknown before the 1960s. It was then a decade before the techniques were applied to medieval sites. There were very few excavations in medieval towns before the 1970s, and it was not until that time that the importance of consistent recovery of plant and animal remains was recognized. The earliest reports on medieval bone assemblages were published in the 1970s;⁵ and it was only in the 1980s that attempts were made to address general issues associated with the medieval food economy and the theoretical problems of interpreting finds from complex sites.⁶ No survey has been attempted before on the scale of the chapters here.⁷

The systematic analysis of human bones from medieval sites for direct evidence of the consequences of diet is also a very recent development. Some results are brought into the discussion here, but further work is necessary to underpin comparative work, such as the criteria to be used for diagnosing diseases associated with malnutrition, for example, scurvy and rickets; to unify the approach to

¹ Dyer (1983). ² Harvey (1993).

³ Campbell, Galloway, Keene, and Murphy (1993); Campbell (2000).

⁴ Woolgar (1992–3; 1995).

⁵ e.g. Kings Lynn: Noddle (1977); Exeter: Maltby (1979).

⁶ Grant (1988); Bourdillon (1988); Serjeantson and Waldron (1989); O'Connor (1992).

⁷ Since the mid-1990s, English Heritage has commissioned surveys of environmental archaeology of the prehistoric and historic period in England, a vast undertaking as far as animal remains are concerned. These surveys form the basis for some of the chapters in this book.

determining final achieved height; and to develop reliable methods for estimating body weight and changes in weight over the adult lifetime. The application of archaeological science to the medieval period has much to offer, but work is at an early stage. The analysis of stable isotopes as a means of identifying the major foodstuffs that contribute to the human skeleton has been developed only since the 1990s. The discussion in this volume is one of no more than a handful of cases, some in France and some in England, where the technique has been applied to the medieval period.

The evidence and its limitations

To unite and interpret this wide range of evidence is far from straightforward. In terms of historical sources, we know most about agricultural production and the seigneurial economy. We need to look beyond this, however, to discover information about consumption, particularly for the peasantry and urban populations. Even the evidence for the great households or monasteries is not uniformly spread: it is much stronger for churchmen, especially from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and for widows, than for secular lords; and some major monasteries have left little historical record. There are also clusters in the documentation: little is available for the period before *c.*1200; there is much less again after *c.*1430 and it is less systematic in both form and content. There is also an uneven geographical distribution: the information in some categories of document, such as manorial accounts, is at its best for estates where land was managed directly, rather than by leasing out farms, a practice that varied both spatially and temporally. The net has therefore to be cast wide for information on diet, from accounts to wills, records of markets, chronicles, and collections of miracles. None of this evidence may be typical in itself—single accounts or isolated references may be difficult to interpret in a wider context—but cumulatively it both provides a wide range of information and demonstrates general patterns.

The chronological perspectives of historians and archaeologists exhibit important contrasts. Historians may discuss some aspects of consumption at a daily level, with a view that might encompass monthly, seasonal, and annual arrangements, as well as the longer term; archaeologists deal in tens to hundreds of years. In the surveys in this book, only those archaeological assemblages which could be dated to within 200 years have been considered. Since the dating of most deposits is based on pottery, the styles of which changed slowly, with old pots remaining in use, it is likely that archaeological data will continue to be analysed within this pattern. This has the advantage of showing trends over the *longue durée*, but misses short-term fluctuations which may have been of considerable importance to human health, such as the consequences of famine. Sometimes, in particularly fortunate contexts, deposits can be dated more

closely,⁸ but it is exceptionally rare for any deposit to be identified as a single episode, while the historian may not uncommonly have evidence for an individual feast.⁹

Archaeologists base their interpretations of human behaviour on physical remains. In this volume, these are mostly those of plants and animals, along with human skeletons from excavations of cemeteries. Other materials can be informative in relation to social and cultural aspects of food: the size and shape of pottery vessels, for example, can suggest how consumption changed from food shared on communal dishes to presentation on individual plates; different patterns of food preparation can be determined from the use of new styles of cooking vessels, such as frying pans; arrangements for food presentation are implicit in, to take one example, the use of chafing dishes, and the quality of vessels for serving food tells us much about the context in which food might form an element in conspicuous consumption.¹⁰ The emphasis of this volume, however, is on the use of archaeological material in a quantitative and comparative framework to indicate overall patterns of diet and nutrition.

Physical remains have to be interpreted in the light of patterns of disposal, preservation, and recovery. Historical records and biological and ethnographic models can help with the first, as they illuminate cultural processes. To take the remains of bones as an example: in towns and in other households distant from the processes of food production, people often put rubbish from food preparation and meals into pits which were rapidly covered. If bones were discarded elsewhere, into general refuse layers, they might suffer the attention of dogs and other scavengers before they became buried, and for this reason fish and bird remains are found in greater quantities in pits than in general layers of rubbish. Where kitchen floors have survived (Plate 1.1), they often exhibit an accumulation of rubbish. Features such as latrines and cesspits, which may preserve a range of bones and environmental material well, needed an investment to create them. In towns in the later Middle Ages, rubbish was carted away from the households where it was generated, and dumped outside the town, sometimes into rivers, where deposition will have occurred at points where there was silting. Deposits that have been transported in this way usually lack the bones of small animals. Few bone remains are found in villages. For example, at Dean Farm, Cumnor, a fourteenth-century cottage was excavated, with archaeological material mostly found in ditches. A large quantity of pottery was recovered, but very little animal bone.¹¹ This could suggest that the peasants ate very little meat, but it may reflect the fact that bones were discarded onto the dunghheap, the contents of which were later spread on the garden or carted to the fields. Material from some archaeological contexts is therefore more likely to document consumption by some social groups than by others.

⁸ See Chapters 8 and 9. ⁹ See Chapter 10.

¹⁰ Brown (2002); Hinton (2005: 185, 234–6, 255).

¹¹ Jones (1994a).