

## (and famine)

**J**ULY WAS HAY MONTH IN THE YEAR 1000. It was the first great harvest of the year, a time of worry about the weather and the need to get the grass cut and dried before the rain could spoil it — and all to feed the animals, since the midsummer harvest produced no food for humans. Hay was fodder to keep the livestock going through the winter. So when the arduous work of haymaking was done, the medieval cultivator found himself facing another stretch that was harder still — the toughest month of the entire year, in fact, since the spring crops had not yet matured. The barns were at their lowest point and the grain bins could well be empty. Tantalisingly, on the very eve of the August harvest, people could find themselves starving in the balmiest month of all. July was the time of another phenomenon quite unknown to us in the modern West — “the hungry gap.”<sup>71</sup>

In *Piers Plowman*, the late medieval fable of the land, we read how July was the month when the divide between rich and poor became most apparent. The rich could survive on the contents of their barns, and they had the money to pay the higher prices commanded by the dwindling stocks of food. Grain and bread prices could soar to exorbitant levels. But this scarcity made July the month when the poor learned the true meaning of poverty. As *Piers* sleeps in the fable, Patience comes to him in a dream, showing him how the poor suffer as they try to survive through their annual midsummer purgatory, grinding up the coarsest of wheat bran, and even old, shrivelled peas and beans to make some sort of bread.

the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* listed the milestones of misery:

- 975 Came a very great famine....
- 976 Here in this year was the great famine in the English race....
- 986 Here the great pestilence among cattle first came to England....
- 1005 Here in this year there was the great famine throughout the English race, such that no one ever remembered one so grim before....
- 1014 In this year on St. Michael's Eve [September 28] that great sea-flood came widely throughout this country, and ran further inland than it ever did before, and drowned many settlements and a countless number of human beings....
- 1041 All that year was a very heavy time in many and various ways: both in bad weather and crops of the earth; and during this year more cattle died than anyone remembered before, both through various diseases and through bad weather.<sup>72</sup>

Fasting was the church's way of harnessing hunger to spiritual purposes, and Easter came at the end of the forty-day fast of Lent. Occurring when it did, in the final months of winter when the barns and granaries were getting bare, there was a sense in which Lent made a virtue of necessity. But fasting was a process which elevated material concerns to a higher plain — a means of personal purification and the way to get God on your side. Perhaps choosing a lack would induce God to give plenty. The rhythm of fasting and feasting was another medieval experience which is foreign to most Westerners today, and it brought a special intensity to the joy with which Easter was celebrated, both in church and at the table after the triumphant Easter morning service.

Meat was the principal ingredient of the Easter service.

feast — large spit-roast joints of beef being considered the best treat. Mutton was not a particular delicacy. Wulfstan's memorandum of estate management described mutton as a food for slaves, and pork seems also to have been considered routine.

The relatively small amounts of fat on all these meats would be viewed by modern nutritionists with quite a kindly eye. Saturated fat, the source of cholesterol with its related contemporary health problems, is a problem of the intensively reared factory-farmed animals of recent years, with their overabundant "scientific" diets and their lack of exercise. All Anglo-Saxon animals were free range, and the Anglo-Saxons would have been shocked at the idea of ploughing land to produce animal feed. Ploughland was for feeding humans. So farm animals were lean and rangy, their meat containing three times as much protein as fat. With modern, intensively reared animals that ratio is often reversed.<sup>42</sup>

Poultry was considered a luxury food, and it was also recognised as a therapeutic diet for invalids, particularly in broth form. Old English recipe and remedy books show that in the year 1000 chicken soup was already renowned for its soothing and restorative powers. As well as chickens, an Anglo-Saxon feast might feature ducks, geese, pigeons, and various forms of game birds — with venison the most highly prized game of all.

Aelfric's schoolroom colloquy is eloquent on the subject of fish, which his "Fisherman" describes himself catching by net, bait, hook, and basket. We are familiar today with lobster and crab baskets, but fishermen in the year 1000 made much use of the brushwood fishing weirs one can still see

in the estuary of the river Severn — wide, fixed funnel-shaped networks of basketwork set out like so many pigeonholes into which fish are swept, then left marooned. Archbishop Wulfstan described the construction of fish weirs as one of the tasks for the summer on the well-run estate, and there were evidently so many of the contraptions in eleventh-century England that they came to hinder river navigation. An enactment in the reign of King Edward the Confessor in the 1060s ordered the destruction of the "fisheries" that hindered the flow of the rivers Thames, Trent, Severn, and Yorkshire Ouse.<sup>43</sup>

"Which fish do you catch?" asked the Master in Aelfric's schoolroom dialogue. "Eels and pike, minnows and burbot, trout and lampreys," replied the pupil playing the role of Fisherman.

For modern tastes, this list contains a disconcerting proportion of wriggly and eel-like creatures. The burbot, also called the eel-pout, was a flat-headed fish with two small beards on the nose and one on the chin, while the lamprey was even uglier, sometimes described as a water snake and featuring a large sucker-like mouth with which it attached itself parasitically to other fish. Rich and oily like all eels, lampreys were considered a particular delicacy in the Middle Ages, and famously ended the life of King Henry I, William the Conqueror's youngest son, who was chronicled as dying in 1135 of "a surfeit of lampreys."

Feasting, however, was about much more than mere nutrition, since conviviality lay at the very heart of Anglo-

Saxon life. The memorandum of estate management attributed to Wulfstan depicted the seasonal celebrations as moments for which the community lived, and the archbishop himself was famous for his lavish hospitality, even as he personally observed the rules of clerical restraint. Abstaining as a pious monk from both alcohol and meat, he nevertheless provided his guests with generous quantities of both, sitting in their midst while consuming his own meagre fare. His personal inclinations made him the vegetarian in the corner, but his role as archbishop and prince of the church made it important that he should also demonstrate hospitality and act as the lord of the feast.

The epic poems of the time all come to rest in banqueting halls. Who is not familiar with the classic medieval scene of lord and lady gathered with their retainers in a great wooden hall like an old tithing barn? There are beams and rafters and draughts through the walls, with a fire in the middle of the floor and damp rising up through the greasy floor covering of rushes, into which have been flung the old chicken bones. It is a tableau much caricatured in modern costume dramas, but archaeological excavations confirm most of the physical details, right down to the blow-fly maggots germinating among the refuse on the floor.

"The warriors laughed, there was a hum of contentment," runs *Beowulf's* description of an Anglo-Saxon feast, and we catch that same atmosphere from the April drawing in the *Julius Work Calendar*, with the revellers seated side by side on what the heroic poems call the *medu-benc* — the mead bench. In the year 1000 a noble feast was a lavishly staged affair, and the wills of the period suggest that people's most prized possessions were the accoutrements with which they

entertained. Reading the inventories, you can imagine yourself at the dinner party — hall tapestries and seat covers, "a table cover with all the cloths that go with it,"<sup>44</sup> candlesticks, and elaborate drinking vessels which must have resembled the drinking horn being filled by the young lad on the left of this month's calendar drawing. Archaeological excavations have uncovered some particularly large and beautiful drinking horns, along with ceremonial jewellery and ornamented goblets — but no cutlery. The eating fork was not invented until the seventeenth century, and when you went to a feast you took your own knife.

Mead was the reveller's drink of choice, according to the sagas. It was a supersweet, alcoholic beverage with quite a kick, brewed from the crushed refuse of honeycombs.<sup>45</sup> Less common was wine — which was also less alcoholic. The yeasts on English grapes rarely produced more than 4 per cent alcohol, and there were no hermetically corked glass bottles in which the drink could acquire a laid-down "vintage" character, since the corked wine bottle was not developed until the eighteenth century. Anglo-Saxon wine was kept in wooden barrels and leather flasks.

Ale was the drink of the Middle Ages, much safer to consume than water, since its boiling and brewing provided some sort of protection against contamination.

You could make use of virtually every bit of the medieval pig, which, foraging alongside and sometimes mating with its wild cousins, had a distinctly boar-like appearance. Its snout was long and aggressive, and it had long legs. Hung in the rafters for a month or so, its sides of bacon made a virtue of the smoke that hung heavy in the thick and pungent atmosphere of the Anglo-Saxon home. Its stomach lining provided tripe. Its intestines provided skin for sausages, and its blood was the main ingredient for black pudding. Sheep, cattle, and poultry all made multiple contributions to the economy of the rural household, but the omnivorous pig was the most versatile and least trouble of all. "Pannage" was the term for the natural, self-foraging diet with which pigs sustained themselves in the Middle Ages, and the value of medieval woodland was often expressed in terms of how many pigs that sector of forest could support. Farm animals were distinctly smaller in the year 1000 than they are today — and they were also smaller than they had been six centuries earlier. The Romans had worked systematically on improving the yield of their meat crop with relatively scientific livestock breeding programmes, but the Anglo-Saxons did not bother. Archaeological excavations show the bones of cows, pigs, and sheep getting progressively smaller through the centuries, then getting bigger again with the introduction of scientific husbandry in the later Middle Ages. In the years around 1000, a plough team of eight oxen was needed to break up virgin land. By the fifteenth century, four to six better-bred beasts

were enough<sup>92</sup> — though this also reflected improvements in plough technology.

The Anglo-Saxons loved their animals. Just as they could recognise the livestock of their neighbours, the chances were they had a pet name for every creature in their own extended family, and they would have revelled in the anthropomorphic menagerie of Walt Disney. Their poems took delight in attributing human characteristics like steadfastness and cunning to the members of the animal kingdom, seeing them as fellow occupants of a world in which human and animal interests were intermingled. Mother Nature's children were all their brothers and sisters.

September was the month when the orchard yielded its richest harvest. *Orccard* was an Anglo-Saxon word derived from *Wortyard*, a garden or plant yard. Archbishop Wulfstan's account of the well-run estate describes fruit grafting as one of the annual tasks, and another manuscript of the time indicates that plums were developed at Glasstonbury by grafting onto the rootstock of the native sloe bush.<sup>93</sup> Monastic communities were particularly well placed to exchange fruit grafts and plant clippings in the same way that they exchanged books for their libraries. The abbey at Ely was famous for its vineyards, as well as for its orchards and a plant nursery which cultivated several varieties of fruit trees.<sup>94</sup>

Apple, pear, plum, fig, quince, peach, and mulberry trees all featured in the garden plan of one grand monastery designed, though never actually built, for Ireland's missionary monks on the shores of Lake Constance in Switzerland.<sup>95</sup> St. Benedict's command that monks should not consume meat was interpreted by most communities to

mean meat from red-blooded, four-legged animals, so poultry was considered immune from the prohibition, as were rabbits, which the Normans brought to England after 1066. But the monastic diet still tended to the noncarnivorous, with a high dairy content and a healthy proportion of nuts. The monks of St. Gall planned to grow chestnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, and walnuts on their estate, and when it came to vegetables, their kitchen garden made allowance for onions, leeks, celery, radish, carrots, garlic, shallots, parsnip, cabbage, parsley, dill, chervil, marigold, coriander, poppy, and lettuce.

These fruits and vegetables were almost certainly more tasty than their modern equivalents, but, like the livestock of the year 1000, they were considerably smaller. Even when allowance has been made for withering and shrinkage, the fruit pips and seeds discovered in early English archaeological sites are smaller than those of today — and several staples that we take for granted in our modern diet are noticeable for their absence.

There was no spinach. This did not appear in European gardens until spinach seeds were brought back from the Crusades in the twelfth century. Broccoli, cauliflower, runner beans, and brussels sprouts were all developed in later centuries by subsequent generations of horticulturalists. Nor were there any potatoes or tomatoes. Europe had to wait five centuries for those, until the exploration of the Americas, and though the recipe books describe warm possets and herbal infusions, there were none of the still-to-be-imported stimulants — tea, coffee, or chocolate.

The greatest dietary gap by modern standards was the absence of any type of sugar. Venetian records describe a

shipment of sugar cane reaching Venice for the first time in 996 A.D., probably from Persia or Egypt,<sup>96</sup> but sugar was not imported any further into Europe until the end of the Middle Ages,<sup>97</sup> and it did not swamp the European palate, creating the modern sweet tooth, until the development of the Caribbean sugar plantations of the seventeenth century. Anglo-Saxon skeletal remains are remarkable for the relative absence of dental and jaw decay.

Honey was the principal source of sweetness in the year 1000. It was so precious it was almost a currency in medieval England. People paid taxes with it, and it was a lucky day when a swarm of bees settled in your thatch:

*Christ, there is a swarm of bees outside,*

*Fly hither, my little cattle,*

*In blest peace, in God's protection,*

*Come home safe and sound!*

The ceremonial feast was the setting in which the Anglo-Saxon monarch displayed his power and dignity. The royal court was something like a circus, touring an annual round of locations in which it successively satisfied then exhausted its welcome. The Easter gathering was one of the principal courts of the year. We can imagine the coming and going of fifty to two hundred people, arriving with their horses that had to be fed and watered, along with the petitioners, favour seekers, and great of the land invited to join the king in worship, do business, reaffirm loyalty, and feast in the time-honoured fashion.