"IN WHAT WAYS DID FOOD AND DRINK SYMBOLISE POWER AND AUTHORITY IN ANCIENT AND EARLY MODERN SOCIETY"

Throughout history, food and drink have been fundamental to the human experience both in terms of biology and behaviour. As requisite nourishment the labour required in food's production has defined economies and shaped societies. The primacy of food has imbued it with symbolic meaning far beyond mere sustenance, and an appreciation of the historical and cultural contexts of these meanings can convey much about a given society.

This essay is concerned with the way food and drink has symbolised power and authority in different historical contexts and will discuss these themes in relation to the classical concept of civilisation and, at more length, Christian asceticism as practiced by women in medieval Europe.

In classical antiquity man was differentiated from the Gods by the food he ate1. Greek and Roman identity was based on the concept civilisation, and relied in part upon renunciation of the practices of barbarian peoples. From the late classical period into the middle ages, food was used to symbolise Ideological notions of civility and characterise barbaric ways of life.2

Control of nature by sedentary agriculture and the domestication of food producing animals were representative of a civilised society, in contrast to the perceived barbarism of nomadic hunter gatherer societies, whose diet based on meat and milk was regarded as primitive and distasteful. Refined food such as bread, wine and oil were transformed into ideals that symbolised the imperial authority of the Rome.3

"Civilised" man developed rituals and etiquette pertaining to food that elevated him from the barbarism of instinctive gorging and the power elite from the shadow of hunger. While food ideals and communal eating became hallmarks of civility that unified the community, the hierarchical structures that developed within these groups emphasised the status of the powerful in relation to others, and could provide a means to divide and exclude sections of the community, although Montanari explains that cultural cohesion was more important than social identity in classical era.4

During the middle ages religion and faith represented by the Christian Church dominated virtually every aspect of life in much of Western Europe. The pre-eminence of religious doctrine translated into ecclesiastical power and authority that heavily influenced political ideology, culture and society.

The Christian Church of the middle ages did not adhere to the strict dietary restrictions prescribed by mosaic law, however food's symbolic importance was embedded in Christian tradition. Religious ritual and custom concerning food and drink mediated the relationships between man, church and God and underpinned Christian dogma. Central to Christian belief is Mankind's redemption from sin through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. In Christian belief and practice the key themes of sin and redemption are inextricably linked with the Church's hegemonic authority. Both sin and redemption are closely associated with and symbolised by food in Christian lore.

Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise after temptation in the from of the forbidden apple proved too great for Eve to resist. Therefore the stain of sin inherent in Mankind is symbolised by an appetite for nourishment that can also function as a conduit for other bodily passions. The seductive power of food is

allegorical to the lure of sin embodied in carnality and other worldly passions.5

Just as food could symbolise all that distanced Man from God, it also had the power to enable communion with God. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, bread and wine are miraculously transformed into Christ's corporeal body, becoming the literal food of redemption 6 (Christ's body and blood being symbolised by bread and wine, those markers of civility from antiquity).

Christians had long observed prescribed periods of fasting as a way of demonstrating faith and piety. The idea that self-denial led to a closer communion with God was extended by Christian ascetics who renounced worldly pursuits in favour of a life of chastity, poverty and suffering, thus enabling spiritual enlightenment. Fasting was a popular ascetic device as, "the flesh, susceptible to wayward passions, could be rendered powerless, the influence of the devil curtailed, and the sin of Adam cleansed".7

The ascetic movement of the middle ages did not operate within the conventions of the Christian church. Ascetic behaviour was practiced by both monastic communities and individuals who, whilst clearly adhering to Christian belief, had the potential to undermine the power of the church with, "an independent source of spiritual authority"8 that might expose ecclesiastical corruption and hypocrisy. Furthermore, asceticism in woman could be interpreted as emancipation from the male power base of Christianity and the social mores of the time as the renunciation of food may also entail the rejection (in practice) of traditional female social roles.

In the chapter from Food and Culture entitled "Fast, Feast and Flesh", Caroline Walker Bynum posits that the symbolic importance of food in religion during the late middle ages was differentiated by gender. She argues that woman's experience of power and authority was closely linked to her role in relation to the preparation and distribution of food, hence woman's religious devotion was more likely to be defined by food related practices than was that of their male counterparts. Bynum's assertion that scholars have ignored the centrality of food in women's religious experiences introduces a new historical paradigm in the study of female Christian asceticism in the middle ages.9

Bynum argues that fasting and Eucharist devotion were viewed by women and men of the middle ages as being predominantly female pathways to holiness. She cites several examples of female saints and holy woman who engaged in self starvation as a means of experiencing God with particular reference to the story of Saint Lidwina of Schiedam to develop her argument, as she acknowledges that there are difficulties with interpreting source material from this time due to a general lack of information as well as the distorted nature of hagiographical accounts of saints.10 However Bynum contends that food was such a crucial factor in the lives of women in the middle ages that its symbolism permeated all aspects of social and religious life, irrespective of the difficulties she mentions in substantiating evidence to support her argument.

Woman's use of food as a mechanism for religious devotion illustrates food's centrality to woman's experience of power in the middle ages as, "by means of food, woman controlled themselves and their world" 11. This "control" might not be viewed as particularly liberating through contemporary eyes, keen as they are to the inequities of patriarchal rule, however these notions had not taken root in medieval Europe. Bynum postulates that a function of female food asceticism in the middle ages was that by renouncing food, women were in fact able to harness the power that was symbolised by woman's relationship with food, thus

enabling them to exert a degree of control over their environment and bodies not always available to ordinary women.

Bynum argues that it is simplistic to assume that food asceticism as practiced by women in the middle ages is evidence of "eating disorders" (however it is worth noting that current interpretations of eating disorders also posit that control over environment as a function of the disorder). One reason she cites for this is that extreme food abstinence could be interpreted as evidence of sainthood, but may also be a sign of demonic possession. 12This illustrates the duplicity of food symbolism in the middle ages. God's authority may be revealed to be the devil's, while food itself can symbolise charity or treachery.

The Eucharist devotion displayed by Lidwina and other female ascetics is explained by Bynum in terms of God experienced as nourishment through Christ's embodied suffering. Lidwina's emaciated and putrefying body emulated Christ's as it was capable of sustaining and healing others whilst requiring no nourishment other than holy communion.

The physicality of Christ, literally present in the Eucharist was, "the most direct way of encountering God"13 in Christian ritual. The sacrament of the Eucharist was a powerful symbol of the Christian church and was presided over by male clerics whose authority was not usually questioned. The behaviour of female saints such as Lidwina in relation to the Eucharist sometimes challenged the authority of the church. Not only did dishonest clerics risk exposure, but the faithful might also discover ways to commune more directly with God, therefore, "bypassing ecclesiastical control".14

Bynum considers that women of the late middle ages easily identified with the idea of Christ as a nurturer, whose human incarnation and suffering transformed his flesh into the food. Christ's body as a source of food is explained to symbolise his humanity in a sense that was understood in medieval times to be female, as woman's bodies were also a source of physical nourishment. Medieval theology's emphasis on Christ's humanity rather than his divinity is borne out by Bynum's overall argument, however her assertions about medieval society's concept of "the female" as a rationale for women's identification with an embodied Christ are less compelling. Her analysis of this theological discourse does not provide authoritative examples of how this translated into practice in the context of the time.

To conclude, food and drink are essential and universal commodities and as such are inextricably linked to both sources of power and agencies of authority throughout history. The symbolism associated with food and drink can be a powerful tool for both the individual and society, and can be manipulated to either unite or discriminate.

1 M. Montanari, 'Introduction: Food Systems and Models of Civilisation', in J.L. Flandrin and M. Montanari (eds), Food. A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present, NY, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 71
2 Ibid., pp. 69 - 78.
3 M. Montanari, 'Romans, Barbarians, Christians. The Dawn of European Food Culture' in J.L. Flandrin and M. Montanari (eds), Food. A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present. Pp. 165 - 167.

4 M. Montanari, Food Systems and Models of Civilisation, p 70.
5 Peter Garnsey, Food and Society in Classical Antiquity. Forbidden Foods, Cambridge, CUP, 1999, ch 6pp 95 - 96.

6 Carolyn Bynum, ‘Fast, Feast and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Woman’ in C. Counihan and P, Van Esterik, (eds), Food and Culture, NY, Routledge, 1997,pp 138 51, passim.
7 Ewald Kislinger, ‘Christians of the East. Rules and Realities of the Byzantine Diet’ in J.L. Flandrin and M. Montanari (eds), Food. A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present, p 199.
8 Garnsey. Food and Society, p 98.
9 Bynum, Fast, Feast and Flesh, passim.
10 ibid, pp 140 41.
11 Ibid, p 146.
12 Ibid, p 141.
13 Ibid, p 139.
14 Ibid, p148.
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