

You are what you eat

You are what you eat... Food, Hierarchy and the Social Order

Miriam Müller

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I have developed an interest in cultural patterns of consumption and what these can tell us about the social order. The hierarchical nature of medieval society also translated into the types of food consumed by the different social classes. In part this was due to economic necessity, but much of it was due to class delineations. Peasants were not allowed to hunt game and kill certain animals, like hares, rabbits and deer for food, as these were the preserves of the rich. Peasants were often amerced (punished) in manorial courts for poaching animals from their lord's warren and even pigeons were out of bounds for peasants. Peasants generally lived on a largely vegetarian diet made up of different types of grain and pulses, brown, coarser bread, vegetables and fruit, which the nobility often tended to scorn as 'peasant food'. Instead the rich ate vast quantities of meat, and the prestigious white, wheaten bread, both items, which were seen as high status foods.

Food therefore delineated class and status. One very interesting area of enquiry for me is the extent to which food had become a political battlefield in the fourteenth century in particular. After the Black Death and sweeping social and economic changes peasants and labourers were aspiring to 'greater' things and demanded the kind of foods normally reserved for their social superiors. This led to great concern and anxiety among the ruling class. In order to assess these issues I am examining a wide range of sources, including contemporary poetry, manorial records, chronicles, zooarchaeological reports, and legislation.