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Review of Feasting the Dead: Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals, by C. Lee

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CHRISTINA LEE. *Feasting the Dead: Food and Drink in Anglo-Saxon Burial Rituals*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 9. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2007. Pp. xiv+176. \$80.00 (cloth).

The feast and the afterlife have always been linked. In the gospels, Jesus speaks of a heavenly banquet; Odysseus watches the shades in Hades wildly lapping up blood; the Norse heroes feast daily in Valhalla as they await Ragnarok. The Anglo-Saxons, both pagan and Christian, followed suit, and Lee here studies the relationship between burial and feasting in Anglo-Saxon culture.

Relatively few written remains survive, especially before the Christian period, so she relies primarily upon archaeological evidence, mostly of grave sites and cemeteries, but supplemented with insights from psychology and cultural history. This is because the deceased obviously did not partake in the feast, so Lee wants to know what the feasting says about the dead (social status, wealth) but also how the living viewed the feast, information gathered partly from what they actually ate.

Lee covers a wide range, and she spares no one. She logically and coolly notes that the living occasionally moderated the extravagance of the feast "since any form of elaborate funeral display draws wealth away from those are to inherit it" (7), a depressingly modern attitude.

Lee also demonstrates that the rites survived the passing of paganism because the funeral had personal meaning for the participants, independent of their religious views. Conversion to Christianity did not diminish the tribal appreciation for a strong leader, although the conversion did change much of the ritual, as will be discussed below.

The study begins with a survey of feasting in general, concentrating on what the Anglo-Saxons actually consumed, who was involved, and how it might be related to the general culture. Lee next goes on to animal remains, distinguishing those animals that were eaten and those (dogs, horses) that were buried to signify the status of the deceased. She makes modest conclusions, such as that the preferred species were not necessarily those most commonly raised but rather those that fit the occasions, even for commoners' burials. Lambs were often found in women's graves, cattle, in men's graves, but Lee warns that the researcher must avoid gender-based presuppositions, when social status tended to play a greater role in both the feast and the contents of the burial site.

Going from food to containers, Lee next turns to utensils, concluding that the containers of food could reveal some aspects of social relationships. She also shrewdly points out that by placing victuals in burial sites, the deceased's relatives could point to their own access to abundant food, no small point in an era when many people often went hungry. Such activity also enhanced the reputation of the deceased as proof that she or he had relatives or followers willing and able to stage an elaborate feast.

But credible as these points and conclusions may be, Lee's language reveals the restricted value of the seemingly extensive evidence she has discovered. Note the following, all from one not atypical page (79): "may reflect," "unless," "as if," "may be subject to," "appears to be," "may have been," "could suggest," "seems to indicate," and "may have been." Phrases such as these appear throughout the archaeological sections of the book, vitiating any attempt to build conclusions based upon archaeological evidence alone. Granted, the reader must respect the well-known and acknowledged limitations of such evidence unsupported by other types of data (diplomatic, literary, numismatic), but scholars simply cannot accept evidence with so many qualifiers. These sections of the book might better have been published as an archaeological report rather than as part of a general study. Having said that, let me assure *Journal of British Studies* readers that Lee offers much to learn, as long as the reader constantly bears in mind the incomplete nature of that knowledge.

The last two chapters deal with the Christian period of Anglo-Saxon history, from which written records have survived to supplement and even inform the archaeological evidence.

Christianity brought a different view of death and thus a different view of burial rites. Lee points out that the church, not the family or the retainers, now determined the proper location for the burial, that is, in consecrated ground. Furthermore, the doctrine of purgatory told the living that they were not finished with the deceased at the burial but rather that they had to make provisions to speed the deceased on the way to paradise—and, unfortunately, they had to do so without indulgences.

Funeral masses supplemented and even supplanted traditional burial rituals. The deceased became part of the communion of saints rather than just of the family and tribal group. Antemortem confession and extreme unction replaced elaborate funerals as the proper accoutrements for entering the next world. Aspects of the old rituals hung on for a while but eventually faded away. Indeed, fasting as a way to fight off the mortal curse inherited from Adam and Eve became more important than feasting.

This is a book for professionals with a determined interest in Anglo-Saxon culture. The tentative nature of much of the unsupported archaeological evidence prevents Lee from reaching conclusions in several areas, but, to her credit, she does not take the evidence where it cannot go. When she can support this evidence with other data, she gives a valuable and convincing account of feasting and Anglo-Saxon burial rites.

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THOMAS FREEMAN and THOMAS F. MAYER, eds. *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England, circa 1400–1700*. Studies in Early Modern Religious History. Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2007. Pp. 249. \$85.00 (cloth).

Thomas Freeman opens this volume by stating that writings about martyrs have emerged in recent years out of an “ocean of neglect”—a claim based more on proprietary historiography than truth. In fact, historians have long been fascinated by martyrs in their biographical, psychoanalytical, or in the case of martyrological writings, literary aspects (with John Knott—overlooked here—being an excellent example of the latter). Nevertheless, *Martyrs and Martyrdom in England* represents the present state of affairs in writing about early modern martyrs; as such it provides a good overview, even if it does not break new ground in directing scholars toward fresher and more original directions on the subject.

Long dormant after the Roman persecutions of Christians, martyrdom was revived in the sixteenth century, when the reformation and official policies of religious uniformity resulted in the deaths of thousands or, in England’s case, hundreds of individuals who perished willingly for their faith. But as Diana Pirovansky writes in one chapter, the Middle Ages witnessed a proliferation of the language of martyrdom, with “Christian suffering” and “Christ’s passion” (71) constituting the primary themes. Although she might have given deeper readings of the material she covers, Pirovansky proceeds to survey devotional and liturgical texts that centered upon Mary’s agonies, legends of virgin martyrs, or boy martyrs who were alleged to have suffered at the hands of murderous Jews. Texts that centered around medieval England’s most famous martyr are only mentioned in passing by Pirovansky, although Thomas Mayer does explore the afterlife of Thomas Becket in a later chapter, describing how, upon the exhumation of the saint by Henry VIII, Reginald Pole injected new life into Becket by asserting that his bones were, simply, burned; by claiming such desecration had taken place, Pole advanced his own notion of martyrdom “and its power as a political tool” (133) in order to demonize Henry, attack the cause of Protestantism, and uphold the truth of the Catholic Church. Mayer proceeds to trace the influence of Pole and his claim of Becket’s burned bones, through such clients or propagandists as Richard Hilliard or (more problematically) Crisostomo Enriquez; as a result, “the existence of a