

Methodological Problems of a History of Everyday Life in the Early Middle Ages

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I

A history of everyday life has been developed by modern and contemporary historians who have all sorts of testimonies at hand, including living "time witnesses". The documentation of earlier times, such as the early Middle Ages, is extremely different. New questions ask for new methods of investigation and criticism, a task which has not even been solved for modern history, let alone for the Middle Ages. What I intend to do here is, first, just to mention and discuss very shortly some main problems and suggestions for solving them.¹ Second, I illustrate this with the one example that is documented amply comparatively speaking: the everyday life in a monastery. I ask three questions:

- 1) What are (or should be) the achievements or ends of a history of everyday life?
- 2) What are its particular problems in regard to the early Middle Ages?
- 3) What methods are necessary to overcome these difficulties?

1) In Germany at least, a **history of everyday life** cannot look back upon a long tradition, and still is a marginal branch more despised than respected

¹ The following remarks rely on a former article published under the title: *Geschichte des mittelalterlichen Alltags. Theorie – Methoden – Bilanz der Forschung*, in: *Mensch und Objekt im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Leben – Alltag – Kultur* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit 13 = Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Sitzungsberichte 568) Vienna 1990, pp. 67–101, where the epistemological research on the history of everyday life is cited and discussed. Instead of enumerating a long list of titles I simply refer to the fundamental study by Gerhard Jaritz, *Zwischen Augenblick und Ewigkeit. Einführung in die Alltagsgeschichte des Mittelalters*, Vienna-Cologne 1989, which includes an ample bibliography.

by established historians. One reason for this lies in the discontinuity of a cultural history as a discipline, unlike in Britain or other countries (and I think it is not by chance that a new beginning by installing an institute aligned accordingly was made in Krems in Austria). The advantage of a rupture, however, lies in the necessity of legitimizing and consequently reflecting any new beginning. Modern history of everyday life has been developed as a reaction against structural and theoretical history in order to recall that man is the centre of historical interest. It also had the pretension to pursue the "right course". Some irritations and verbal fights have developed out of this last, misleading claim that need not be repeated here and *should* be antiquated by now:

- A "modern" history of everyday life is concerned with the same objects as a traditional cultural history, but these are investigated in a *socio-historical* perspective.
- It is *not* able to dispense with theories (on the contrary).
- It is *not* an alternative to structural history, but must consider its structural conditions and study the mutual interactions. Indeed, this is the core of a modern history of everyday life which therefore is not necessarily a "history of private life".
- Finally, in my opinion, it is *not* a new perspective capable of viewing the whole of history from a new angle, but rather *one* branch in the overall range of historical research.

The specific theme or object of a history of everyday life is a change of perspective:

- away from the great historic events towards the private world of the individual,
- away from the important personalities towards the world of ordinary people,
- away from the great actions towards the world of "microhistory", within the family, the neighbourhood, the place of settlement.

Within this frame, a history of everyday life inquires into active behaviour and passive experience as well as mental perception. Again, however, this must be seen within the "world of the living" ("Lebenswelt"), not detached from the surrounding conditions: that is the spatial, legal, political, social, economic, cultural, religious and intellectual forces, and also within the frame of the human "conceptual world". The history of everyday life is, of course, not a collection of anecdotes about individuals, but is interested in

a sort of “collective individual”; it is a “history of normality” or “mass phenomena” and therefore dependent on a generalization of individual cases. Above all, this field should not content itself with describing evidence, but should *explain* the way of living and its underlying connections. With such an orientation, a history of everyday life is a highly complex field that offers an understanding of structures and environments, allowing us to interpret the experiences and realities of people. And, naturally, everyday life is not static, but, like all historical objects, is constantly developing. This leads us to the second question:

2) If these are the purposes and ends of a history of everyday life, what then are the particular **problems** regarding the early Middle Ages? The main problem is, of course, the lack of sources or rather of adequate and clear sources. Early medieval authors had absolutely no scholarly interest at all in everyday life. Not only were their testimonies written for very different purposes, but they would tend to emphasize normative intentions and ideal concepts rather than reality, singular and exceptional events rather than usual and ordinary incidents. With regard to everyday reality, the contents of our sources are therefore considerably distorted by offering an ideal, a legal or moral norm, exceptions and highlights. Aspects of everyday life are merely mentioned in a casual and unintentional manner, or as negation, as the departure from an ideal or the prohibition of an unwanted practice. Moreover, many texts and phrases are figurative and symbolic in content. The same is true for early medieval pictures, mostly book illuminations which are invaluable sources for the later Middle Ages, but regarding the earlier centuries, they make a stereotypical and “spiritual” impression.

3) Finally, I attempt to give some clues as to how to surmount these problems and meet the requirements discussed above. The problems emerge primarily in relation to a *criticism of the sources*.

- a) The fact that our interests are distinct from those of the writers of our sources requires a careful criticism of the sources which takes into account their authors’ actual **intentions** to avoid misleading conclusions. It is therefore advisable to ask respectively three questions:
 - What did the author really want to say?
 - What does he tell us about everyday life?
 - What conclusions can be drawn from these statements with regard to his actual intention?

In addition, we must examine the character or *genre* of the sources as

well as its specificity. This is more important, as we often must consult so-called “new” sources in order to get “everyday information”, that is genres which have been neglected so far by historians. In many cases a specific criticism has yet to be developed.

- b) With regard to the contents of described everyday **realities**, one must analyse its character: does it reflect an ideal, a social or moral norm or a fiction, or does it describe a real case (or perhaps a supposed reality), to use expressions coined by Gerhard Jaritz? A repeated prohibition, for example, may indicate a very different reality (things that are prohibited may be rather usual).
- c) Regarding the “**representativeness**” of a text – how “everyday” is it – the latter must be examined for its general validity (or whether it just describes an exception) and compared with other texts. Wherever possible, this requires quantitative analysis. Again, exceptions, contrasted with their opposites, may allow conclusions on normal proceedings. The “representativeness”, however, must not be confused with the question how “medieval” something is. There are **distinctions** to be made. We must distinguish, of course, between different classes, sexes, ages etc.
- d) Finally (and this is presumably the most difficult part to achieve) we must ask for the **meaning** of our information within the totality of life, that is we must situate it in its structural and intellectual background in order to *explain* its occurrence. In this phase particularly the adoption of historical theories is required. It is only by observing these criteria that we may progress from information about everyday life to a *history* of everyday life. Moreover, we may even explain the “great history” through its everyday background. Succeeding in this would be proof of the absolute necessity and relevance of a history of everyday life.

II

This may all sound rather banal (and should do so because the history of everyday life is part of the historical science and therefore bound to its methods), but it has too often been neglected in practice and, moreover, turns out to be extremely difficult in applying. As an example, I have chosen the everyday life in an early medieval monastery. We certainly have much evidence on monasteries in the early Middle Ages: rules, conventions (*consuetudines*) and their commentaries, capitularies and synodical

decrees, charters and letters, chronicles, lives and miracles of abbots and monks. Yet, though monastic life is no doubt the best documented sector of everyday life in the early Middle Ages,² it is far from easy (and sometimes impossible) to describe (let alone explain) the everyday life in a normal early medieval monastery. To make this more obvious, I deal with just one aspect: **eating and drinking**, of course, “classical” themes of traditional “cultural history”. Where then is the difference in a “modern” history of everyday life? In space of this essay, I can give no answers; I aim to disclose the problems.

- 1) Looking at the **sources**, the first problem is their relation to tradition. The original source is, of course, the Rule of Saint Benedict. In chapters 39–41,³ Benedict regulates meals and drinks, but here we are already confronted with some problems:
 - a) Benedict deals only with three aspects (and disregards the rest): the times of the meal(s), differing according to the season, the number of meals served (one or two, according to the season) and the quality of the meals (two cooked meals plus fruit and vegetables and bread and wine).
 - b) This is, of course, a norm (though one that, by its choice, reflects a certain reality), but we do not know how far it had been observed.
 - c) It is not understandable without taking into regard the “monastic” intentions.
 - d) (with priority): Benedict’s rule had been written for Montecassino about 540. Of course, the rule was still valid in the early Middle Ages, indeed, it did not become compulsory for all convents until the Reform of Benedict of Aniane in the early ninth century, henceforth forming the “norm” for all monasteries. Benedict’s biographer, Ardo, writes: “Every monastery thus was reduced to one standardized form, as if instructed by one master and in one place, and all was given to observe one standardized measure of

² A short bibliography can be found in: *Mönchtum und Gesellschaft im Frühmittelalter*, ed. Friedrich Prinz (Wege der Forschung 312) Darmstadt 1976. Most pertinent are the various articles written by Josef Semmler. For the traditional view of monastic life, see Léo Moulin, *La vie quotidienne des religieux au Moyen Age, Xe–XVe siècle*, Paris 1978.

³ The edition by Adalbert de Vogüé and Jean Neufville, *La règle de Saint-Benoit I–VI* (Sources chrétiennes 181–186) Paris 1971, is not complete. Cf. *Regula Benedicti. Die Benediktusregel*, 1992.

drink, food, watch, and rhythm.”⁴ Yet, despite the crucial question, whether the rule had been acknowledged in practice, different rules remained to be used supplementally, and it was Benedict of Aniane himself who wrote a “Concordia regularum” comparing the single dispositions in all rules available.⁵

- 2) Early medieval evidence has its own character, but, as with Saint Benedict’s rule, consists mostly of sources that do not reflect an immediate reality but are normative. The second problem, therefore, is how to disclose **reality in those norms**. Saint Benedict’s rule already left some free play (and thereby reacted to the monks’ actual needs) when it made the quantity of meals and drinks dependent upon the amount of physical exercise, on age, health, the weather, and individual differences; the existence of two meals shows that each monk could choose according to his taste (which accordingly was being regarded). We may conclude, therefore, that a certain discrepancy existed between the rule and its realization from the beginning. This was extended in early medieval sources (such as the ninth century commentary on Benedict’s rule written by Smaragd of Saint Mihiel).⁶

Actually, the norms themselves and some narrative sources disclose that these rules were not strictly observed. New regulations seemed to react to infringements. Thus, in Aachen, eating between meals was ruled out: apples and salad should be consumed only in connection with the main meals.⁷ It obviously had become usual to pass over part of one’s food to another monk, so that Smaragd had to ban this custom as well.⁸ The Council of Rome of 826 had to recall the indispensable existence of refectories and dormitories.⁹ We may conclude, therefore, that in some places there were defects even in these basic pillars of a

⁴ Ardo, Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis 36, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH SS 15, S. 215: *cunctaque monasteria ita ad formam unitatis redacta sunt, acsi ab uno magistro et in uno imbuerentur loco. Uniformis mensura in potu, in cibo, in vigiliis, in modulationibus cunctis observanda est tradita.*

⁵ Migne PL 103, Sp. 701–1380.

⁶ Commentaria in Regulam s. Benedicti, c. 39–41, Migne PL 102, col. 873–8.

⁷ Legislatio Aquisgranensis c. 10, ed. Josef Semmler (Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum [CCM] 1) Siegburg 1963, p. 546.

⁸ Smaragd, Commentaria c. 39 (n. 6) col. 873.

⁹ MGH Capit, 1, no. 180, c. 28, p. 375.

regulated monastic life. When the life of John of Gorze praised the saint because he was able to fast for (just) two days, this cannot have been a very widespread virtue. And even John never dispensed with wine because, by drinking water, he got stomach trouble.¹⁰ A similar conclusion can be drawn from Ardo's report that Benedict of Aniane had never eaten any meat since his conversion.¹¹ Considering the bias of a *Vita*, this was obviously very "abnormal".

A completely different "reality" is shown by some narrative sources such as Ekkehard of St. Gallen's report of King Conrade's visit to the monastery.¹² This report abounds with offences against the Rule: the king was allowed to eat in the refectory; on the third day, everybody ate meat and game in the King's and Christ's honour, the monks did not listen to the reader, and they disregarded the command to keep silence; moreover, the meal was accompanied by jugglers and musicians. Finally, the king offered a donation so that, from then on, the monks could feast more opulently in the Easter week in his own memory. Again, this is not the norm, but an exception, and Ekkehard may certainly have had a moral as well as a satirical bias (though far from easy to grasp his intentions, it is significant that, according to his words, nobody cared except some older brothers to whom all this was absolutely novel). Yet these reports warn us against believing that the rules and norms were widely observed. In another episode Ekkehard consequently reports of a decision of the visitor, who came to Saint Gallen to see if rules were observed, that "the free decree of the abbot could grant what the monk might eat and drink".¹³ In a further satirical story, the visitor himself, a reform abbot, was caught eating meat clandestinely.¹⁴

- 3) One of the crucial problems remains the question of the **representativeness** of such reports. After all, all early medieval sources present individual cases, referring to one monastery at a particular time, and

¹⁰ *Vita Johannis Gorziensis* 27, ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz, MGH SS 4, p. 344.

¹¹ *Vita Benedicti* 41 (n. 4) p. 218.

¹² *Casus s. Galli* 14/16, ed. Hans F. Haefele (*Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters* 10) Darmstadt 1980, pp. 40–4.

¹³ *Ibid.* c. 105, p. 212.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* c. 143, p. 276–8.

they very rarely allow us to apply a quantitative analysis of the evidence. Since, for lack of sources, it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the everyday life of a "microcosm", that is of one monastery, in comparing the evidence, one must observe carefully the different contexts.

- 4) A further, related factor is **development**. There were changes (Smaragd even had to explain some expressions used by Benedict and obviously not understood any longer by early medieval monks, such as *pulmentum*, *crapula*, or *hemina*). Then there were adaptations. The famous reform council of Aachen in 816, for example, allowed twice the quantity of beer if there was no wine available.¹⁵ Significantly, some proscriptions were mitigated: Smaragd, for example, facilitated the fasting rules during summer, and the canons of Aachen allowed drinks after vespers if necessary.¹⁶ In due course, the meals offered more variety, and there were different sorts of bread and wine.¹⁷ Few of these adaptations were infringements on the rule, but indicate rather a fairly nonchalant application. (We shall have to consider the reasons for this). On the other hand, however, there were also restrictions in the context of monastic reforms: The Council of Aachen not only prohibited the consumption of meat of quadruped animals, but also of fowl.¹⁸ Monks were prohibited to participate in the banquets of laymen¹⁹ or to eat and drink in taverns.²⁰ We can hardly observe, however, a straight-lined development, but rather ups and downs that are connected with a certain kind of secularization and a subsequent monastic reform.
- 5) This leads us to the crucial point of advancing from a cultural history to a history of everyday life by considering **structural background** in order to explain evidence. I emphasize just two exemplary points.
- a) From an ideological or abstract point of view, we must consider the aims and *purposes of a monastic life* first. An underlying sense of

¹⁵ *Legislatio Aquisgranensis* c. 28 (n. 7), p. 436.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* c. 20, p. 436.

¹⁷ Cf. Gerd Zimmermann, *Ordensleben und Lebensstandard. Die Cura Corporis in den Ordensvorschriften des abendländischen Hochmittelalters* (Beiträge zur Geschichte des alten Mönchtums und des Benediktinerordens 32) Münster 1973, pp. 37–87.

¹⁸ *Legislatio Aquisgranensis* c. 8 (CCM 1, nr. 7) p. 546.

¹⁹ Council of Reisbach a. 800, c. 24, MGH Conc. 2, p. 210.

²⁰ *Capitula Ansegisi* 1,14, MGH Capit. 1, p. 399.

the normative evidence can be properly conceived only from this perspective. On the one hand, the sources aimed at regulating the community life, the *vita communis*, on the other, they derived from monastic endeavours and ideals that were linked with ascetic and religious purposes. Clear examples for this are the fasting regulations, the prohibition to eat meat or, to a certain degree, the different order of meals between Easter and Whitsuntide, in summer and winter. Another example of a religious (and at the same time social) purpose is the proscription that the monks should not fast on Sundays and feasts, but rather eat more in honour of the Saviour (as a counterpart to the fasting regulations).²¹ Early medieval customs regulated the entry into the refectory and the behaviour during and after meals.²² The *Memoriale I* from Aniane delivered a strict order of the appropriate times which were announced by the sound of a *cymbalum*, of how to enter the room (quickly and orderly, with folded hands, saluting the cross), of the seating arrangements (according to the *ordo*), the beginning of the meals according to a strict ceremony, and its sequence. There is a similarly detailed proscription for drinking (with bowing before the Cross and before the abbot).²³ The Master's Rule regulated not only the number of drinks but demanded a prayer before and after each drink.²⁴ Smaragd, in his commentary, says that the meal should not begin before the benediction of the abbot.²⁵ Such regulations are partly due to discipline (our first aspect). But apart from that, the monastic meals were organized as a ceremony meant to hold the community together and remind it of its primary vocation. And yet, these ceremonies were a reflection not merely of a monastic ideal, but also of a common social procedure, even in the secular world. In several articles, Gerd

²¹ The Master's Rule prescribed three or four dishes on Sundays, Isidor allowed even light meat.

²² Cf. *Ordo regularis* of Montecassino c. 4–5, ed. Thomas Leccisotti, CCM 1 (n. 7) p. 102.

²³ *Memoriale I*, c. 5,11–14, ed. Claude Morgand, *ibid.* pp. 254–7.

²⁴ Cf. Benedict of Aniane, *Concordia regularum* (n. 5) col. 1132–8.

²⁵ Smaragd c. 39 (n. 6) col. 873.

Althoff has emphasized the social and even political importance of common meals in Ottonian times as a means to establish and confirm fraternity and friendship.²⁶ Of no minor importance were the symbolic meanings. Smaragd even gives a religiously symbolic explanation for the restricted use of wine: wine is bad (he says) because Noah, who remained unconquered by the waters, was afterwards defeated by the wine (how much more, Smaragd warned, would this be true for a weak monk).²⁷ Eating and drinking in a monastery was certainly more than mere intake of food; it was determined by religious, monastic, social, and disciplinary concerns, though again, contrasting mental and social norms with reality, it is doubtful that such thinking really was present in the heads of all the monks during their meals.²⁸

- b) No less important in understanding the proscriptions on meals and drinks is *the material background* of the monastic site²⁹ and of monastic economy. Though we are inclined to consider medieval convents as belonging to the richest landowners this is, of course, not true in every single case. On the contrary, there are many examples of bad times and decline. Indeed, the monastic meals were dependent on the situation of supplies. Smaragd teaches that the monks should never demand more than the abbot can grant according to the "strength of the monastery".³⁰ Adalhard of Corbie,

²⁶ Gerd Althoff, *Der frieden-, bündnis- und gemeinschaftsstiftende Charakter des Mahles im früheren Mittelalter*, in: *Essen und Trinken in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, ed. Irmgard Bitsch, Trude Ehlert u. Xenja von Ertzdorff, Sigmaringen 1990, pp. 13-25; Id., *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue. Zum politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1990, pp. 203-11.

²⁷ Smaragd c. 40 (n. 6) col. 876.

²⁸ A different purpose of some regulations was the care for the monks' health. For example, after blood-letting monks were allowed to eat and drink how much they wanted; cf. Benedict of Aniane, *Collectio Capitularis* c. 7, ed. Josef Semmler, CCM 1 (n. 7) p. 518.

²⁹ The famous plan of St. Gall gives a detailed image of a refectory, with benches all along the walls, two tables at the long sides, a separate table of the abbot and a small one for guests as well as the reading-desk in the middle of the room; cf. Zimmermann (n. 17) pp. 322-3.

³⁰ Smaragd c. 40 (n. 6) col. 876.

in his *Statuta*, took great efforts to explain how many bushels his monastery should receive each year from the villages and from the mills, and how much bread for how many monks could be made from this.³¹ The income, however, should not only suffice for the monks, but also for prebendaries, vassals, scholars, clerics and laymen, and, of course, for feeding the poor. In his *Life of Saint Benedict* (of Aniane), Ardo relates that, during a time of famine, the abbot ordered to reduce the monks' ration; afterwards, the monks themselves voluntarily dispensed with part of their ration in order to help the poor; as a consequence, some of them even died of hunger.³² (Of course, this is told as a praiseworthy exception.) There are other examples of temporary menaces. The *Life of Alcuin* reports of great losses because merchants filled the wine boxes with sand and water,³³ and Letald of Micy complained that Bishop Ermentarius desecrated the monastery and distributed its possessions to his vassals so that the monks of Micy themselves received only a small bread, a handful of vegetables and almost no wine.³⁴ There may have been times when even fish was lacking on feasts.³⁵ Thus, life in a monastery depended on economic resources as well as the organizational abilities of the abbot and his functionaries. Seemingly banal problems such as the real worth of the medieval measures and weights become decisive once we try to find out the actual quantity of food of a single monk.³⁶

These are only a few examples to illustrate some of the problems one must take into account. Open questions remain. Is the monks' food, for example,

³¹ Adalhard of Corbie, *Statuta* c. 3 (*De annona*), ed. Josef Semmler, CCM 1 (n. 7) pp. 375-8.

³² *Vita Benedicti* c. 7 (n. 4) p. 204.

³³ *Vita Alcuini* 17, ed. Wilhelm Arndt, MGH SS 4, p. 193.

³⁴ Letald, *Liber miraculorum S. Maximini* 4,23, Migne PL 137, col. 807-8.

³⁵ Wandalbert of Prüm, *Miracula s. Goaris* 8, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger, MGH SS 15, p. 366, reports such a lack of fish exactly when Abbot Asuerus of Prüm visited the monastery of Saint Goar. (A miracle saved the "meal" at that time.)

³⁶ Cf. the controversy between Michel Ruche, *La faim à l'époque carolingienne: essai sur quelques types de rations alimentaire*, *Revue historique* 250, 1973, pp. 295-320, and Jean-Claude Hocquet, *Le pain, le vin et la juste mesure à la table des moines carolingiens*, *Annales ESC* 40, 1985, pp. 661-690.

a particular monastic phenomenon or just a reflection of the contemporary social habits of that time? In comparison, is it to be considered opulent or frugal? How do we explain the motives for the monks' diverging from the rule, and is this a common factor? There is still a long way to go until we know what eating and drinking in a monastery really meant and how far it differed from other ways of life, but at least, by asking the right questions, we become more and more conscious of how to get there. It is only by considering such methodological factors as discussed above that we shall succeed in turning *from a cultural description to an explanation of the specific character of an everyday life.*

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Vorwort

Das vorliegende Heft widmet sich zwei Anlässen: dem *International Medieval Congress*. Leeds 1994, an dem *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* zwei Sektionen ausrichtete, und dem Kongreß *Die Vielfalt der Dinge*, den *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* zusammen mit dem *Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften im Oktober 1994 in Krems veranstaltet. Zum einen kommen vier überarbeitete Vorträge der Tagung von Leeds zum Abdruck. Zum anderen werden Resümees der Vorträge der Kremser Veranstaltung präsentiert, die auch den Kongreßbesuchern als Einführung dienen sollen.

Im November 1994 wird als Sonderband unserer Reihe Elke Schlenkrichs "Alltag der Lehrlinge im sächsischen Handwerk, 15. bis 19. Jahrhundert" publiziert werden. Gleichfalls noch im heurigen Jahr wird Heft 31 von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* erscheinen.

Gerhard Jaritz

PAPERS

DELIVERED AT THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIEVAL CONGRESS,

LEEDS 1994