

## BEAVER TAILS AND ROASTED HERRING HEADS: FAST AS FEAST IN LATE-MEDIEVAL LIVONIA

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Fast and feast – this pair of words sounds well and makes a good book title.<sup>1</sup> Fast and feast (in the Middle Ages) are usually treated as contrasts, as notions that oppose each other, that exclude each other. What I intend to do in this essay is to demonstrate how fast and feast were sometimes combined. In order to do so, I shall examine cases where a festive occasion took place in the course of a fasting period, particularly Lent.<sup>2</sup>

The relations between fast and feast in the Middle Ages have been studied before. A rightful question has been if fast, the very idea of which is self-restriction and abstinence, in practice meant any self-restriction? The answer to this largely depends on the social, temporal, and regional context. It is clear that one's eating (and fasting) habits and possibilities depended on one's status, position, wealth, health, age, and gender, and that, in general, the fasting regulations became less strict in the course of time. It has been shown that for prosperous people, fasting periods meant above all an opportunity to consume extraordinary and expensive foodstuffs, and that this helped to satisfy their need for (self-)representation.<sup>3</sup> This was true for fast days in general; however, my aim is to demonstrate that it was also no problem to arrange lavish feasts during Lent and other periods of abstinence, and, at the same time, to formally break no fasting rule imposed by the Church.

The sources I have used originate from the merchant-dominated Hanse towns of medieval Livonia – an area which covered approximately present day Estonia and Latvia. I shall mainly provide examples from the municipal and church accounts of Reval (Tallinn) and from the ordinances of the merchants' associations – particularly of the Brotherhood of the Black Heads – in Reval and Riga. I have chosen to discuss different types of feasts: first, irregular and ex-

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast: Food in Medieval Society* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976; 5<sup>th</sup> printing 1994).

<sup>2</sup> This article was written under the auspices of the grant no. 5401 from the Estonian Science Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Jaritz, "Fasten als Fest? Überlegungen zu Speisebeschränkungen im späten Mittelalter," in *Geschichte und ihre Quellen: Festschrift für Friedrich Hausmann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Reinhard Härtel (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1987), 157-68.

traordinary occasions, such as receptions in honour of secular and ecclesiastical dignitaries, and second, traditional annual festivals of the merchants' guilds. These feasts nevertheless have a common feature: all of them represent the eating habits of the wealthy upper classes.

Before turning to fast and feast in medieval Livonia, it is necessary to briefly introduce general characteristics of food consumption in the area.<sup>4</sup> Towns with their German upper and middle classes largely followed German diet and cookery traditions.<sup>5</sup> In particular, we can draw parallels with consumption patterns in northern Germany, Prussia, and other regions around the Baltic Sea. These similarities were determined by the natural environment and further promoted by the Hanseatic trade. The dominant position of beer, the consumption of mead and other drinks made from honey, the widespread use of honey itself, the use of bacon, butter, and poppy-seed oil, the extensive consumption of fish (both salt- and freshwater species), the baking of various kinds of rye breads in addition to wheat bread, the rare appearance of Mediterranean fruits – all these features were characteristic of dietary models in Livonia as well as in northern Germany and Scandinavia.

The most spectacular events in late medieval Reval were the entries of the Master of the Livonian branch of the Teutonic Order (for the sake of convenience, in the following referred to as the Livonian Master).<sup>6</sup> Reval was under the power of the Teutonic Order from 1346 until 1561. A festive entry of the Livonian Master was an event usually including the oath of allegiance by the burghers of Reval and the recognition of the town's privileges by the Order. The town always arranged a grand reception in the Town Hall in honour of the lord, and the ingredients purchased for these feasts were carefully recorded in the municipal accounts.

These receptions with hundreds of diners were the grandest feasts in Reval. If one compares them with the most sumptuous local feasts – the annual festivals of the town councillors – one immediately notices some significant differences. The first difference was the quantity of food: partly due to the number of diners, but partly due to the importance of the event. The second and most remarkable difference was the variety of food served. At the receptions in hon-

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<sup>4</sup> See also Inna Pöltsam, "Essen und Trinken in den livländischen Städten im Spätmittelalter," in *Quotidianum Estonicum*, ed. J. Kivimäe and J. Kreem (Krems: Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 1996), 118-27; *eadem*, "Söömine ja joomine keskaegses Tallinnas" (Eating and drinking in medieval Tallinn), in *Vana Tallinn IX (XIII)*, ed. Raimo Pullat (Tallinn: Estopol, 1999), 9-118; Anu Mänd, "Festive Food in Medieval Riga and Reval," *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 41 (1999), 43-93

<sup>5</sup> For a recent analysis of the German diet, see Melitta Weiss Adamson, "Medieval Germany," in *Regional Cuisines of Medieval Europe: A Book of Essays*, ed. M. W. Adamson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 153-196, esp. 163-166.

<sup>6</sup> On the subject, see Anu Mänd, "Signs of Power and Signs of Hospitality: The Festive Entries of the *Ordensmeister* into Late Medieval Reval," in *The Man of Many Devices ..., Festschrift in Honor of János M. Bak*, ed. B. Nagy and M. Sebök (Budapest: CEU Press, 1999), 281-293.

our of the Master, we find wild game and fowl (roe deer, hare, partridge, and even peacock), which rarely turned up on the tables of the councillors. The variety likewise extended to the meat of domestic animals. The accounts also list huge amounts of imported spices as well as Mediterranean fruits and nuts. In addition to local beer, Einbeck beer and Hamburg beer, some of the most famous in Germany, were purchased for these occasions. The wines included several expensive and well-known sorts: Rhenish wine, claret – a spiced wine, Mediterranean wines (malmsey, romney), and French wine (Poitou). The highlight of the banquets in honour of the Master were without doubt the ‘surprise’ dishes, in which the emphasis was laid on visual effects (for example, a gilded peacock in 1513).<sup>7</sup> The third difference, although somewhat difficult to detect, was the quality of food. The Master frequently travelled with his personal chef, who presumably assisted the cooks of Reval in preparing for such grand feasts and introduced some novel dishes and cooking methods.<sup>8</sup>

The menu described above was characteristic of the receptions that took place in ordinary, that is, non-fasting times of the year. However, once, in 1525, the festive entry of the Livonian Master Wolter von Plettenberg took place during Lent, on *Oculi* Sunday (the fourth Sunday before Easter). The grand reception in the Town Hall took place four days later, on Thursday. We learn from the municipal accounts that because of Lent the feast took place at midday, whereas in a non-fasting time it was customary to arrange it in the afternoon.<sup>9</sup> The influence of Lent can most remarkably be observed in the feast menu. Instead of meat dishes a large variety of fish was prepared: herring, *rotscher* (stockfish), salmon, sturgeon, eel, and ‘fresh fish.’ Some of them, such as *rotscher*, sturgeon, and herring, were imported fish. A fortune of 45 marks was spent on 12 butts of fish jelly brought from another town – Dorpat (Tartu) – especially for this occasion.<sup>10</sup> It is worthy of note that in the Middle Ages, jellies were considered to be high-status dishes, owing much of their prestige to the skills required for their preparation.<sup>11</sup> For example, we never find jellies or aspics in the feast accounts of the Livonian merchants’ guilds.

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<sup>7</sup> Mänd, “Festive Food,” 65-66, 91-93.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 68. That the Teutonic Order disseminated recipes from southern Germany to the Baltic Sea countries (including Livonia), is suggested by a fifteenth-century recipe collection from Königsberg in East Prussia; Adamson, “Medieval Germany,” 179.

<sup>9</sup> Tallinn City Archives (*Tallinna Linnaarhiiv*, hereafter TLA), coll. 230, inv. 1, no. Ad 32 *Städtische Kämmerer-Rechnungen 1507–1533*, fol. 178v: “Item des donnerdages tho myddaghe is de gnedige her meyster ... thor myddages malydyt to gaste affgekamen, dar men sust buten der vasten s. f. g. tho namyddaghe gewonlick is to plegende.” See also Paul Johansen, “Ordensmeister Plettenberg in Reval,” *Beiträge zur Kunde Estlands*, vol. 12 (1927), 113.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, fol. 179r-179v; Johansen, “Ordensmeister,” 114.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Santich, “The Evolution of Culinary Techniques in the Medieval Era,” in *Food in the Middle Ages*, ed. Melitta Weiss Adamson (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 66.

Another special delicacy served to the Livonian Master in 1525 was beaver tails.<sup>12</sup> The amount of fish jelly purchased for this particular banquet indicates that it was meant for a large number of diners,<sup>13</sup> whereas there were only three beaver tails and they were most likely reserved only for Plettenberg and perhaps some other dignitaries. Since a modern reader knows the beaver as a mammal, an explanation is needed here why it can be found in the accounts of not only this particular feast but also elsewhere in medieval Europe. The fact that the church regulations forbade eating meat and other animal products in Lent ‘inspired’ people to find other substitutes. The question was how to define the borderlines between meat and fish. A general understanding was that no animal that was born and bred on land was to be eaten.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, several inhabitants of the sea, such as whales, dolphins, and porpoises qualified as fish.<sup>15</sup> The same concerned certain birds that, it was believed, lived their entire life in water – the barnacle goose and widgeon.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the beaver, which had the advantage of being amphibious, it was acknowledged that the creature itself was a mammal; however, its tail, covered with scales, was considered to be fish.<sup>17</sup> It was even believed that the tail never left water. The concept of the beaver’s tail being a fish found its way into various kinds of literature, including bestiaries, poetry, cookbooks, and travel descriptions.<sup>18</sup> Because of its nutritional value, beaver tails were much appreciated Lenten food, and medieval cooks tended to prepare them as alternatives to meat particularly on days of abstinence.

There was also an additional reason which made the beaver a particularly desirable meal, and that was its allegorical meaning. The beaver was much hunted because of the valuable secretion from his castor glands, used in medicine. According to a legend originating from antiquity and widely spread in the Middle Ages, the beaver, when hunted and not able to escape, bit off his testi-

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<sup>12</sup> TLA, coll. 230, inv. 1, no. Ad 32, fol. 179r; Johansen, “Ordensmeister,” 114.

<sup>13</sup> The number of diners is not indicated in the account book; however, it might have been around 500 (Johansen, “Ordensmeister,” 104). The tables were laid in three different rooms and the guests were seated according to rank.

<sup>14</sup> Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Ketcham Wheaton, *Savoring the Past: The French Kitchen and Table from 1300 to 1789* (University Park: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 12; Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 47-49.

<sup>17</sup> Wheaton, *Savoring the Past*, 12; Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 47; Bruno Laurioux, *Manger au Moyen Âge: Pratiques et discours alimentaires en Europe aux XIVe et XVe siècles* (Paris: Hachette, 2002), 115.

<sup>18</sup> Gertrud Blaschitz, “Der Biber im Topf und der Pfau am Spieß,” in *Ir sult sprechen willekommen: Grenzenlose Mediävistik, Festschrift für Helmut Birkhan zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. C. Tuczay et al. (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), 422; Laurioux, *Manger au Moyen Âge*, 115-16; *Koch und Kellermeistery / von allen Speisen vnnnd Getrânken / viel guter heimlicher Künste / etc.* (Frankfurt am Main: Herman Gulfferich, 1547), 7: “Vom Biber. Der Biber ist ein Thier wie ein Meerhundt / lanng vnd schwanger / hat sehr lang Zeen / er mag nit la(n)g lebenn er hab denn den schwanz im Wasser / den(n) er ist halb fleisch / vnd d(a)z ander theil der Schwa(n)z ist Visch.”

cles. This quality of self-castration made him a model for a good Christian who renounces bodily desires, firmly encounters the hunter (the Devil), and thus saves his soul.<sup>19</sup>

Let us set aside the nuances of medieval popular theology and nature studies and return to the receptions in honour of the Livonian Master. The event of 1525 was not the first entry of Wolter von Plettenberg into Reval.<sup>20</sup> However, this time he was welcomed as the actual lord of the territory, whereas in earlier times he had been paid homage in the name of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. The situation in 1525 was rather complicated (Reformation events and so on), which may explain why the Master did not wish to postpone his visit until the post-Easter period. On the other hand, the fact that Plettenberg was now a rightful lord of Reval may explain why the tables in the Town Hall were covered more richly than ever before, and why this particular banquet cost the town a fortune of 1350 marks – a sum for which a small manor could be obtained.<sup>21</sup>

The Livonian Master was the secular lord of Reval, and his festive entry was certainly an event that could and would not suffer because of the restrictions imposed by Lent. However, from church accounts we learn that the situation was not at all different when an ecclesiastical authority had to be treated during a fasting period. In 1501, on the Thursday and Friday before *Laetare* (the third Sunday before Easter, also known as Mid-Lent), the bishop of Reval, Nicolaus Roddendorp, undertook to visit St Nicholas' church in the lower town of Reval.<sup>22</sup>

He arrived in the company of four canons, two servants, two *jungen* (possibly boys from the cathedral school), and two scribes.<sup>23</sup> For two days, the bishop was generously treated by the churchwardens.<sup>24</sup>

The banquets took place in the sacristy, and their menu is worth citing in detail.<sup>25</sup>

The first day:

The first course: hemp jam (or purée) with saffron, cumin, and honey;  
cooked herring; salted salmon with vinegar and onions.

The second course: stockfish with oil and raisins; roasted fresh sole; fresh fish with sauce.

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<sup>19</sup> Blaschitz, "Der Biber im Topf," 421.

<sup>20</sup> Mänd, "Signs of Power," 288 (note 24), 293.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, 293 (cf. the costs of the earlier entries of Plettenberg); Johansen, "Ordensmeister," 104, 115.

<sup>22</sup> The bishop resided on the castle hill, called Domberg, which was legally a distinct area from the lower town.

<sup>23</sup> TLA, coll. 31, inv. 1, no. 216 *Rechnungsbuch der Kirchenvormünder 1465–1531*, fol. 210r.

<sup>24</sup> Church wardens (there were two) were predominantly appointed from among the members of the town council.

<sup>25</sup> TLA, coll. 31, inv. 1, no. 142 *Denkelbuch der St. Nikolai-Kirche*, fol. 22v-23r.. The menu is published in: Gotthard Hansen, *Die Kirchen und Klöster Revals* (3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed., Reval: Kluuge, 1885), 28-29.

The third course: fried fish, bream and other fish fried in oil; salted eel with pepper; fresh fish with sauce.

The second day:

The first course: roasted herring; fresh Baltic herring<sup>26</sup> taken out of salt; fresh fish with oil and raisins.

The second course: fresh eel with sauce; roasted fresh sole; roasted cold bream that were left over from the previous day.

The third course: fresh sole with sauce; fresh flounder fried in oil; fish in aspic.

In addition, the wardens bought two tuns of beer, three *stope* of Rhenish wine, four *stope* of romney (a sweet wine from Southern Europe), as well as wheat bread, and alms bread for the occasion. It seems quite unlikely that around 200 litres of beer and seven litres of wine<sup>27</sup> were consumed in these two days (even if the bishop were accompanied by the assistants mentioned above); possibly the wardens gave part of the alcohol to him as a present.<sup>28</sup> Surprisingly enough, the two-day treatment of the bishop did not cost very much: only 11 marks and 15 shilling. This was not the only time Bishop Roddendorp visited St Nicholas' church, and notes also survive on the receptions of other bishops; however, none of these took place in a fasting period and was as carefully recorded as the visit of 1501.

From these examples, we may conclude that it was no problem for the representatives of the prosperous classes to arrange a splendid feast during Lent if the circumstances so required. The usual meat dishes were replaced with a variety of fish – with expensive, foreign, and therefore prestigious fish. It has to be stressed that early spring (the events of 1501 and 1525 took place in March) was the most difficult time of the year to provide a banquet because food supplies were the poorest. However, the town councillors of Reval did their best to treat the visiting dignitaries according to their status, and to demonstrate the wealth of the town.

Receptions in honour of the Livonian Master and the bishop of Reval were rare and extraordinary events. However, a combination of fast and feast can also be observed in the case of the two most important annual festivals of the merchants' guilds – Christmas and Carnival. Each of them lasted for approximately two weeks and were called the main drinking feasts (*hovetdrunke*).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Clupea harengus membras*.

<sup>27</sup> A *stop* = c. 1-1.5 litres, a tun of beer = 90-100 *stope*.

<sup>28</sup> As the municipal accounts of Reval reveal, it was customary to send some bottles of wine or some tuns of beer to distinguished visitors. Juhan Kreem, "Gäster i Reval under medeltiden: Gåvor i stadens räkenskaper" (Guests in medieval Reval: Gifts in the city accounts), *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* 83, no. 3 (1998): 471-488.

<sup>29</sup> On these festivals, see Anu Mänd, "Die Festkultur des livländischen Kaufmanns im Mittelalter am Beispiel der Fastnacht," in *Die Stadt im europäischen Nordosten*, ed. R. Schweitzer and W. Bastman-Bühner (Helsinki, Lübeck: Aue-Stiftung, 2001), 95-130; *eadem*, "Festival Scenarios of the Hanseatic Merchants in Late Medieval Livonia," *European Medieval Drama* 6 (2002): 83-98.

Christmas and Carnival were related to the two major fasts of the year, Advent and Lent, which also had significant impact on the feast menus. Although the main emphasis was laid on meat, the guildsmen also ate plenty of herring and stockfish at their festivals.<sup>30</sup>

The Christmas revelries of the guilds in Reval began on 26 December. However, the Black Heads also had an important pre-ceremony which took place on the Friday before St. Lucy's Day (the feast of St. Lucy is 13 December).<sup>31</sup> This ceremony was a beer-tasting, during which the confraternity members and their guests tasted various sorts of beer, and chose the best sort to be bought in large quantities for their Christmas festival. Why they chose the Friday before the feast of St. Lucy for this ceremony remains somewhat unclear because Friday was the main fasting day of a week. In addition, although in the late Middle Ages fasting in Advent was generally no longer obligatory, it was still strongly advised in Livonia, possibly because of the influence of the Teutonic Order.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, for these two reasons a Friday in Advent seems to have been unsuitable for a festive occasion. However, the ordinances of the Black Heads reveal that only proper fast dishes were served at the beer-tasting: first, dried herring; after a time, sturgeon's roe (i.e. caviar); then dried salmon followed by baked apples; and at eleven o'clock at night a true delicacy – roasted herring heads.<sup>33</sup>

While the Christmas feast began within the period of fasting, Carnival ended in it. The Black Heads in Reval finished their Carnival revelries on the first Sunday in Lent (*Invocavit*); the Rigan confraternity continued for two more days.<sup>34</sup> What deserves special attention is that in Riga, on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, after a rich and filling banquet, herring was carried around, and this symbolic ceremony signified the turn to fasting.<sup>35</sup> The importance of the moment was emphasized by a special speech by the alderman of the Black Heads, in which he reminded the brothers that it was time to turn to fasting according to the old custom.<sup>36</sup>

The next morning, on Ash Wednesday, the confraternity members assembled for an obligatory general meeting, where the statutes were read aloud, fines

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<sup>30</sup> Mänd, "Festive Food," 56-60, 83-87.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Hermann von Bruiningk, *Messe und kanonisches Stundengebet nach dem Brauche der Rigaschen Kirche im späteren Mittelalter* (Riga: Kymmell, 1904), 187.

<sup>33</sup> Mänd, "Festive Food," 58-59.

<sup>34</sup> Mänd, "Festival Scenarios:" 88-89.

<sup>35</sup> Wilhelm Stieda and Constantin Mettig, *Schragen der Gilden und Aemter der Stadt Riga bis 1621* (Riga: Häcker, 1896), 574, art. 109: "Item up den sulven avent horet den vastelavendt schafferen tho hebben twe watt heringes uth der pekell unndt so vele brodes, alss men dar tho behoff hefft; dar gahn se mede in de fastenn. " See also 574, art. 111, art. 114, 611, art. 150, art. 153, 612, art. 154: " ... so solen de schaffer herink na ummedregen, dar se mede in vasten gan aver dat gantse hus."

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, 611, art. 153: "... wy dencken in vasten to gande na older wanheyt. Got geve em eyn gudt jar, de hyr neger kumpt, unde tastet mede to, wat Got vorlent hefft."

collected and new brothers admitted. At six in the evening, the drinking feast continued. The activities did not differ much from those of the previous days: women and maidens were again invited to dance in the guildhall and beer was happily consumed.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that alcohol was not forbidden during Lent. There is a famous saying “Fishes must swim,” which originated in antiquity but was widely exploited also in the Middle Ages, particularly in order to justify excessive drinking during the fasting period.<sup>38</sup>

Although the festival of the Livonian merchants did not end on Shrove Tuesday but continued for one more week, meat dishes were no longer offered. Instead, on Ash Wednesday, expensive imported spices (including ginger, nutmeg, and grains of paradise) and confectionery made out of spices (dragée) were ceremonially served three times during the evening.<sup>39</sup> It was likewise considered necessary to indicate in the regulations the quantity of spices and sweetmeat provided: the dragée alone came to nine pounds (i.e. around four kilograms). The consumption of such luxury items in the course of the fasting period was characteristic of wealthy upper classes (which the merchants certainly were) and served as a sign of social distinction. The ceremonial serving of such prized foodstuffs had to be a public event and carried out in the presence of guests, for it expressed the status and position of the confraternity members and served as a means of collective self-representation.

These examples from late medieval Livonia demonstrate that Lent did not mean any serious self-restrictions for the upper classes, be they rich laymen or high church officials. Instead of meat, they consumed expensive fish, expensive imported spices, sugar, Mediterranean fruits and nuts, and other expensive, extraordinary and prestigious food. Members of the town elite obviously could afford to buy such foodstuffs – during Lent their menus were abundant and varied. The consumption of expensive and luxurious food, in fact, transformed fast into feast.

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<sup>37</sup> Mänd, “Die Festkultur,” 105, 107; *idem*, “Festival Scenarios,” 90.

<sup>38</sup> Henisch, *Fast and Feast*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> Stieda and Mettig, *Schragen*, 575, art. 118, 614, arts 165-66, art. 168.

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QUOTIDIANUM

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VON GERHARD JARITZ

GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER KULTURABTEILUNG  
DES AMTES DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

**niederösterreich kultur**

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## VORWORT

Die vorliegende fünfzigste Ausgabe von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* eröffnet eine gute Möglichkeit aufzuzeigen, welch reiches Spektrum an Beiträgen im Veröffentlichungsorgan unserer Gesellschaft seit ihrer Gründung im Jahre 1982 erschienen ist. Wir hoffen, dass wir unsere Tätigkeit in der gewohnten Art und Weise mit Verstärkung der internationalen Komponente fortsetzen können und damit weiterhin die Vielfalt der wichtigen Forschungsbereiche einer Geschichte von Alltag und materieller Kultur des Mittelalters zu vermitteln imstande sein werden.

Die zwei dem Verzeichnis der Veröffentlichungen vorausgehenden Beiträge in dieser Ausgabe stellen die für den Druck überarbeiteten Vorträge dar, welche die Autorinnen am „International Medieval Congress“ (Leeds, 2004) in der Sektion „Contrasts in Quotidianity III: Food“ präsentiert haben. Die Aufsätze geben sehr deutlich zu erkennen, welche Spannweite an Fragestellungen sich gerade bei Untersuchungen zur Ernährung des Mittelalters als wichtig erweist und daher in den kritischen Quellenanalysen zu berücksichtigen ist.

Gerhard Jaritz, Herausgeber