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COURTLY FEASTS IN THE MIRROR OF LITERATURE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to prove that the ideal of sumptuous feasting popularized by court writers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was a significant part of court culture, acting as a practical means of spreading sophisticated social standards. It is assumed that literature from that era was used to raise aristocratic circles to a higher civilization level and to impose a particular cultural paradigm on courtly society. Both poets and court chroniclers extolled the lavishness of the royal feasts, creating a cultural template that the English nobility gradually adopted. Feasts played a significant role in the early Plantagenet culture because they acted as powerful symbol of the splendour, magnificence and power of the royal court. What is more, by the elegant design of the dining hall, the sophistication of dishes and the observance of court ceremonial at the table, the court circles expressed their separation from other strata of society who were lower in the feudal system and were not familiar with court etiquette. The descriptions of lavish feasts documented in Arthurian literature greatly appealed to popular imagination and filled in the gaps in historical records of the time. Therefore, they may help to gain insight into the magnificence of material culture and a new understanding of intricate social standards introduced in the early Plantagenet period.
Key words: royal feasts, courtly culture, court etiquette, Arthurian literature, English romances

Courtly feasts in the early Plantagenet period primarily played an important political role. The German cultural historian Joachim Bumke considers their significance in connection with the question of the nature and character of medieval power [Bumke 2000: 20]. Since the monarch's rule depended heavily on the support of his major magnates, the king expected their "advice and support" (*consilium et auxilium*) in matters of crucial importance to the state. Feasts, which were usually organised to celebrate the most important church festivals, naturally brought together the greatest barons of the kingdom, and thus had not only a religious dimension, but also a deeply political one. In effect, the festive feasts were gatherings of the counts

and barons of the kingdom, at which important economic and political decisions were made.

While the political function of the great royal feasts is obvious and does not require further explanation, their cultural or even culture-forming role seems to be much more interesting. In the accounts of the English poets and historians, references to sumptuous feasts provide a pretext for extolling the greatness of the sovereign. Thus, the Anglo-Norman poet Gaimar, describing the magnificence of Henry I's court, draws attention to the extraordinary atmosphere of the "royal feasts, […] the wit, courtliness and love shown by this best of kings." A little further on, he mentions "the love and gallantry, the woodland sports and wit, the feasts and splendour, largesse and riches, […] and the great gifts he gave" [Gaimar 1960: 205, lines 6495–9]. According to the poet, a king whose court has room for sumptuous feasts, wit, rich gifts, courtly love and hunting is undoubtedly worthy of song. Such references to great feasts were deliberately made by the poets in order to show the splendour of the royal court. Since, according to many scholars, literature of that period was often used as a tool of royal power and as an instrument of political propaganda [Aurell 2007: 365–394; Schmitt 1984: 503–506], it can be safely assumed that it could be also used for cultural purposes, that is to promote a particular courtly ideal and to elevate aristocratic circles to a higher civilization level [Jaeger 1991: 19–48, 211]. In fact, feasts were definitely an important element of early Plantagenet court culture, providing a unique opportunity to display the king's wealth and to demonstrate the courtly etiquette which was a product of the environment centred around the monarch. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the ideal of courtly feasting was depicted in the literature of the period and to prove that it was a part of a wider project supported by the early Plantagenet monarchs to impose a particular cultural model on courtly society.

The cultural paradigm, which included the ideal of feasting, evolved out of a synthesis of the Christian model and French influences. The American medievalist Bridget Ann Henisch, points out that the Church played an important role in the process of the gradual change of medieval societies' approach to food [Henisch 1999: 2ff]. In fact, the biblical descriptions of feasts attached spiritual significance to certain foods, which provided inspiration for the most prominent scholars of the time. For example, John of Salisbury devoted a part of his treatise *Policraticus* to reflections on food and feasting [*Policraticus* 8.2 – 8.12]. He frequently cited biblical images referring to the sacralisation of food, such as the transformation of water into wine at the Canaanite feast, the welcoming feast for the prodigal son or the central image of the Last Supper. Christ, by transubstantiating bread and wine into his body and blood, elevated these foods to the highest spiritual level. The Church, with its authority, gave food a unique spiritual value, and by introducing periods of fasting into the liturgical year, it strove to prepare the faithful for the time of joyful celebration. In this way, courtly feasts, usually organized to celebrate religious holidays, were steeped in Christian symbolism.

By giving equal importance to the virtue of asceticism and the Christian duty of hospitality, the Church introduced inevitable tension between those two mutually ex-

clusive values. In the writing of the period, there are attempts to harmoniously combine the virtue of moderation with the religious and cultural requirement of showing generosity towards one's guests. In effect, a religiously based courtly ideal of politeness was promoted, where internal mortification was balanced by external hospitality. For example, in twelfth-century England, the reputation of the ideal host was held by Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury and former chancellor of King Henry II, who, despite practising strict personal asceticism, always displayed lavish hospitality for his guests. At dinner, as a form of mortification, he himself drank "water, used for the cooking of hay," but at the same time, he did not neglect his duties as a host: "He was always, however, the first to taste the wine before giving it to those who sat at table with him" [William FitzStephen 1961: 56]. In the opinion of his contemporaries, the Archbishop was the embodiment of princely manners and courtly customs.

In the realities of the secular royal court, however, generosity towards guests was not so much an expression of Christian love towards one's neighbours, but as an opportunity to show the monarch's power and wealth to his subjects. The splendour accompanying royal feasts was thus intended to demonstrate to influential vassals that their monarch was superior in magnificence to both his allies and enemies. This was undoubtedly the aim of Richard I the Lionheart, who, during the Third Crusade, dazzled all guests with the magnificence of his court. The poet Ambrose extolled the sumptuous feasts given by the English king at Messina, at which Richard I wished to overshadow the greatness of his rival, King Philip Augustus of France [Ambroise 1897: lines 1054ff; Ailes 2003: 46]. Similarly, the negotiations with the island ruler Tancred, which lasted five days, from 3 to 8 March 1191, took place in a cordial atmosphere and were celebrated with a series of feasts during which the two rulers outdid each other in their generosity [Roger of Hoveden 1867: vol. 2: 158f]. References illustrating the importance of royal feasts appear also in other literary works of the period. In the epic *Kudrun*, Uote, the daughter of a Norwegian prince, complains to her husband, the King of Ireland, that joyful celebrations are less frequent at his court than at her father's court in Norway. When King Sigebant asks her what she misses most, she replies: "A king as mighty as you should receive guests more often; he should often ride the *buhurt* with his people, for it would bring honour both to him and to his land" [*Kudrun*: 27.2ff]. The Irish ruler follows his wife's advice and hosts a lavish feast. Holding sumptuous celebrations was considered a crucial component of wielding monarchical power, setting a good ruler apart from a ruthless tyrant. On the other hand, the monarch's frugality could be seen as an indication of his weakness. King John's successor, Henry III, had the following inscription engraved on his chessboard: "He who does not give what he has will not get what he wants" [Southern 1970: 112].

Court feasts usually followed a strict protocol, as described by two English clerics, Bartholomaeus Anglicus (c. 1203–1250) and Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175–1252). The work by the English Franciscan, *De proprietatibus rerum* (*On the Nature of Things*), provides detailed information on the rules concerning royal feasts. It lists thirteen points according to which a sumptuous feast should proceed, regulating the proper time and place of the meal, the interior decoration of the banqueting hall, the behav-

iour of the host and the manners of the servants serving at the table. The "cheerfulness of the host's countenance,"[1] as well as "the sweetness of the singing and the music"[2] should provide a lovely, relaxing atmosphere. It was the host's responsibility to ensure that the feast proceeded at a leisurely pace and that guests were assigned a place at table according to their position in the feudal hierarchy. In addition to the treatise *De proprietatibus rerum*, another equally important historical source on the principles of the administration of an aristocratic court, is the work by Robert Grossesteste, the famous English bishop and theologian. Its most detailed version was written in French, at the request of Margaret, Countess of Lincoln. The two works mentioned synthesise the components of a medieval feast, which will be discussed in more detail below.

What is interesting, factual information contained in those encyclopaedic works is perfectly illustrated in the fictional works of the period, especially in romances belonging to the Arthurian cycle. For example, the figure of King Arthur is identified by the poet with "the man of the merry month of May" and with "Whitsuntide," [Wolfram von Eschenbach 1926: 281, 18–19] as most of the feasts held at his court took place in the spring season. Such literary descriptions perfectly reflected historical realities, as the celebrations of Whit Sunday were an excellent occasion to organize festive feasts to which the king's most important vassals were invited. After an arduous winter, which made travel difficult, weather conditions were much more favourable in spring. It was easier to both travel and deploy guests.

What is more, both medieval poets and learned clerics emphasised that meals should be eaten together, under the supervision of the feudal lord. Feasting together was supposed to transform a loose courtly society into an integrated community. Bishop Robert Grosseteste advised the Countess of Lincoln to "forbid dinners and suppers out of the hall, in secret and in private rooms, for from this arises waste, and no honour to the lord or lady" [Robert Grosseteste 1890: 141]. In fact, his treatise indicates a strong tradition of communal feasting, through which bonds between the feudal lord and his vassals were strengthened. The courtiers formed a community resembling a family, whose head was the feudal lord or, in the case of the royal court, the monarch himself. Noteworthy are the terms *familiares* or *familiaris regis*, used at the court of Henry II Plantagenet, denoting persons or a person not literally belonging to the royal family, but strongly connected with the monarch and usually belonging to his closest millieu [Warren 2000: 305; Turner 1988: 14]. Cases where men and women feasted separately, sometimes at separate tables or even in separate chambers, although recorded by both, poets and chroniclers, were rather an exception to the norm. We come across an interesting description of such a practice in Wace's *Roman de Brut:* "For the Britons held still to the custom brought by their sires from Troy, that when the feast was spread, man ate with man alone, bringing no lady with him

[1] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, ed. G.B. Pontanus, 1601 (facsimile ed.: Frankfurt 1964), p. 265f: "vultus hilaritatem … Nihil enim valet coena ubi facies hospitis cernitur turbulenta."

[2] See above, p. 266: "ministrorum urbanitas seu honestas … cantorum et instrumentorum musicorum iucunditas … Sine enim cithara vel symphonia non solent coenae nobilium celebrari."

to the board. The ladies and damsels ate apart" [Wace 1996: 68]. Moreover, Matthew Paris remarks that women were not invited at all to the feast following the coronation ceremonies of Richard I Plantagenet [Matthew Paris 1872, vol. 2: 349ff]. However, in general, court poets praised an ideal situation where the courtiers ate together, with the ladies feasting together with the knights: "With each prince sat a beautiful lady, lovely, pure and noble, who ate with him; this elevated their spirits" [*Mai und Beaflor* 8.27-30; quoted in Bumke 2000: 187].

Literature of the period draws attention to the special role of the room in which court ceremonies were held. Bartholomaeus Anglicus points out that the English noblity "are accustomed to celebrating their feasts in spacious, lovely and secure rooms" [Bartholomaeus Anglicus 1964: 265].[3] When Perceval approaches the fictional castle of Beaurepaire, a maiden spots him from the window of the great castle. She takes his hand and leads him into a beautiful, long and wide hall, decorated with an elaborately carved ceiling. Then they sit down on a bed covered with brocade fabric [Chrétien de Troyes 1968: 509]. Later in the piece, Perceval is invited to the Fisher King's castle. The squires lead him into a huge square hall where the ruler rests on a big wooden bed supported with four high pillars made of bronze. A fire made of dry logs casts a bright glow; the hall is so big that at least four hundred people could be warmed there and they would not lack space [Chrétien de Troyes 1968: 526f]. To a certain extent, such descriptions reflect the reality of royal and princely residences, and they give some insight into the layout of the rooms and the function of the furnishings within them. In fact, medieval feasts were held in the largest hall of the castle. There was a reception area with the podium, from which the ruler presided over the banquets, and which was towering over the guests seated at large tables arranged along the hall.[4] The dining room was supposed to be large and spacious to accommodate all the guests comfortably. This feature was emphasised by Jean de Joinville in his description of the feast organized to celebrate the knighting of the brother of King Louis IX of France in 1241. The sumptuous feast took place in the hall of the castle of Saumur, which was built by "the great King Henry of England for his magnificent feasts. […] I don't think there is a hall anywhere even close to it in size,"[5] concludes the chronicler.

The dining room served a variety of functions during the day. It was only in the evening that this chamber was transformed into a magnificent, beautifully decorated feasting hall. According to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, it was illuminated by the glow of candles placed in richly decorated candelabra [Bartholomaeus Anglicus 1964: 266]. To get a glipmse into its interior design and decorations, one can turn once more to poetic descriptions found in Arthurian romances. In Morgan Le Fay's castle, King

[3] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, p. 265: "In locis enim spatiosis, amoenis rt securis, solent nobiles facere festa sua."

[4] Such a podium was built, for example, in the royal residence in Clarendon [see Barber 2003: 61].

[5] Jean de Joinville, *Histoire de Saint Louis*, ed. N. de Wailly, Paris 1868, sp 35: "ès hales de Saumur; et disoit l'on que li grans roys Henris d'Angleterre les avoit faites pour ses grans festes tenir. Et les hales sont faites à la guise des cloistres de ces moinnes blans; mais je croi que de trop loing il n'en soit nuls si grans."

Arthur goes through a beautiful hall with walls adorned with shields of arms and silk draperies, to reach a chamber with costly gold and silver ornaments: "thousands of torches and wax candles glowed inside and there was not a wall there that was not covered in silk […]. The maidens led [the king] to a hall upholstered in silk and linen and decorated with mint and gladiolus; there they asked him to rest on a very beautiful and rich chair in front of the table that was set" [Boulenger 1987: 386f]. This description, which, according to some Western scholars, has something of a dream-like vision, enables us to imagine an ideal royal feast. In another poetic description, this time in King Arthur's castle, magnificent gold-woven tapestries were hung in the dining room. The floor was covered with costly silk carpets and sprinkled with rose petals. Just before the feast, tables and chairs were placed in the dining room and the seats were covered with richly decorated bedspreads, on which colourful brocade cushions were placed for greater comfort of the guests.[6] The poetic vision of King Arthur's court, where the castle floor is covered with fragrant rose petals [Chrétien de Troyes 1968: 489], reflected the actual practice of sprinkling the court chambers with scented straw or freshly picked leaves. A 12th-century biographer of St Thomas Becket praised the archbishop for the exquisite decoration of the dining chamber in his court: "[Thomas Becket] ordered that fresh straw or hay should be scattered daily in his feasting hall in winter, and green rushes or leaves in summer, so that the crowds of knights, for whom there was no more room on the benches, might rest on a clean and tidy floor without soiling their costly cloaks and splendid shirts" [William Fitz-Stephen 1961: 42].

Many writers drew attention to the special role of the table, covered with a white linen tablecloth and decorated with the costly tableware: with precious goblets, platters and salt cellars made of gold and silver. When Wace extolls "the wealth and the splendor of Arthur's feast," he remarks that: "The dishes and vessels from which they are were very precious, and passing fair" [Wace 1996: 68]. After the Norman Conquest, the mazer, a type of chalice made of maple wood and often having a silver base and trims, was brought to the royal court in England. A beautiful chalice of this type, dating from a slightly later period, has survived to the present day, its main decoration being a silver-plated medallion depicting a scene of the slaying of a dragon by the English romance hero Guy of Warwick [Hope 1887: 139–142]. In the early Plantagenet era, boat-shaped goblets, already fashionable at the French courts, were adopted at the English court [Bumke 2000: 191]. The so-called aquamanilia, elaborately decorated jugs used to wash hands at the beginning and at the end of the feast, were filled with water with aromatic herbs and petals of fragrant flowers. In the 12th century, they usually took on sophisticated forms: of a lion, a griffin or a rider on horseback, in which the English medievalist Erica Dodd sees inspiration from Eastern culture [Dodd 1969: 220–232]. At royal banquets, the precious goblets, salt shakers and decorative vessels were a clear indication of the monarch's power and wealth. For this reason, not all of the costly tableware was

[6] Daniel of Beccles points out in *Urbanus Magnus* that one should not rest one's elbows on cushions during a feast.

placed on the table and intended for use. The most valuable vessels were displayed in a special sideboard, which was placed in the dining room only for the duration of the feast [Hammond 2005: 105]. This custom is metaphorically portrayed in the fictional works of the period. In one of the famous romances, the knight sees the Grail's retinue approaching: lads and maidens, carrying magnificent objects, including a silver lance, golden candelabra and precious platters. Clad in glittering armours and golden ornaments, they emerge from one chamber to disappear into another after a ceremonial procession through the hall [Boulenger 1987: 386f]. In such apparently fictional accounts, the reader may find details that one will not encounter in historical chronicles written by courtier clerics.

In addition to jugs, goblets and platters of high artistic value, the royal table was also furnished with plates and bowls made of hard-baked bread. At court banquets, bread played a special role and had a wide range of uses: it could serve as a plate, spoon, salt shaker and even as a towel or napkin. In addition, the quantity, quality and freshness of the bread indicated the guest's position in the feudal hierarchy [Hammond 2005:107]. Trenchers of bread were carved from hard, four-day-old bread, and attention was paid to the shape of the plate thus made. Square, thick slices were carefully cut from round loaves, as oval or circular shapes were considered too common and not elegant enough [Hammond 2005: 108; Henisch 1999: 159]. Bread in the form of cut-up sticks was particularly useful for picking up leftover gravy or soup from the plate, as Daniel of Beccles observes. The poet remarks that pieces of bread intended for this purpose should be sliced off with a knife or broken off [Daniel of Beccles: lines 930f], suggesting that the practice of tearing off fragments of bread with the teeth was not uncommon. Bread sticks were also used to consume wine. As the guests often had to share a cup, instead of drinking the wine directly from the goblet, they soaked bread in it, which they then ate. A reference to this practice is found in the 13th century romance *Aucassin et Nicolette*, in which the main character says in a fit of love that his chosen one is sweeter "than bread dipped in wine" [*Aucassin et Nicolette...* 1925: 14f]. Finally, bread also acted as a napkin, used to wipe knives and clean hands during the meal [Daniel of Beccles lines: 2616f].

A knife, spoon and napkin were usually placed only at the monarch's table setting. Other guests were expected to bring their own knives and spoons. The knife, although it had a much narrower use than bread, was an essential prop at any feast, as it served also as a spoon and fork. A banqueting guest familiar with the customs of the court was expected to use the knife to cut dishes into small portions and to place the portions thus divided on the companion's plate. The servants acting as cutters or slicers, needed to have exceptional skills, as the individual dishes required different cutting techniques [Daniel of Beccles lines 2670–2675]. Different rules applied to the cutting of portions of rabbit or piglet, others for meat from seals or porpoises, and the rules also varied depending on how the meat was prepared. It was the slicer's job to carefully separate the meat from the bone, cut away the fat and make thin, perfectly shaped slices for the monarch and the most important guests. Thus, the slicer's duties required considerable skill, precision and talent. The ability to skillfully and gracefully divide

food aroused widespread admiration, whereas the clumsiness of the cutter was not accepted by the court banqueters and could only be justified by the torments of love. The protagonist of a thirteenth-century romance, a young Frenchman employed as a teacher to a beautiful English heiress, falls in love with her. As a result, he becomes utterly helpless when given the task of cutting dishes during a family dinner: the knife slips from his hands and seriously injures his fingers. Embarrassed and disgraced, he leaves the banqueting hall and runs away to his bedroom. The young lady, however, forgives him his clumsiness and brings a perfectly cooked chicken stewed in grape sauce to his chamber [*Jehan et Blonde* 1885: vol. 2: 436–439, 475–478].

In addition to knives and breadsticks, feast-goers also had spoons at their disposal. In twelfth- and thirteenth-century England, the spoon was an essential prop for any feast, as most dishes were served in liquid or semi-liquid form, such as stews, soups, thick roasting sauces or lighter sauces and toppings. In theory, soup could be drunk directly from the bowl, but the manuals of court etiquette strongly discouraged that practice [Daniel of Beccles line 1045]. For this reason, spoons were a very attractive object and, when they were provided by the host, guests often could not resist the temptation to appropriate one for themselves. In the 12th-century romance *Roman de Rou*, one of the knights slips a spoon into his sleeve [Bertrand 1966: 284]. Daniel of Beccles warns the English courtiers: “Do not take the spoon you were provided at dinner home with you!” [Daniel of Beccles line 1003]. To maintain basic hygiene during the ceremonial meal, delicate napkins made of linen cloth were sewn to protect the court tablecloths from excessive soiling. Guests familiar with the rules of courtly etiquette would wipe their food-soiled hands in the napkins, although there were also cases of tablecloths being used for this purpose.

The grand feasts which took place at the English court, provided an opportunity to demonstrate the power and wealth of the rulers of the Plantagenet dynasty, ostensibly demonstrating their superior place in the complex web of feudal dependencies. It should be emphasised that the idea of hierarchy, regulating the structure of feudal society, was one of the key issues considered when organising court feasts. The place assigned to a feaster at the royal table indicated his social position, wealth and influence at the royal court. Therefore, the presence of many distinguished guests of high standing created a complicated situation, as assigning them the wrong seats could lead to serious conflicts. In order to avoid the misunderstandings associated with the guests’ claims to priority, court poets invented the concept of the Round Table, at which King Arthur’s best knights were to sit:

> Because of these noble lords about his hall, of whom each knight pained himself to be the hardiest champion, and none would count him the least praiseworthy, Arthur made the Round Table, so reputed of the Britons. This Round Table was ordained of Arthur that when his fair fellowship sat to meat their chairs should be high alike, their service equal, and none before or after his comrade. Thus no man could boast that he was exalted above his fellow, for all alike were gathered round the board, and none was alien at he breaking of Arthur’s bread [Wace 1996: 55].

Throughout the 12th and early 13th centuries, however, the concept of the round table was merely the invention of poets. Tables used at courtly feasts in England were usually long and rectangular, with the monarch seated either at the head of the table or in the middle. Seats in the immediate vicinity of the king, to his left and right, were reserved for the most important guests. The further away from the monarch, the lower the feaster's place in the feudal ladder. Valuable advice on the proper seating arrangements at the count's table was given by Robert Grosseteste:

> [The seventeenth] rule teaches you how to seat the people at a meal in your house. Let all noble members of the household and the guests sit together on both sides of the tables as much as possible, and not four here and three there. You shall always sit in the middle of the high table, so that your presence, as lord or lady, is visible to all… [Robert Grosseteste 1890: 402].

This passage proves that feasts at the courts of aristocrats were modelled on royal banquets. The culture of the monarchical court radiated into the courts of English nobles also in this aspect.

For most banqueters, the main attraction of each feast was the food served, as people have a natural tendency to derive pleasure from eating. However, similarly to the decoration of the banqueting hall, the setting of the table or the seating arrangements, the dishes served at royal feasts had above all an important symbolic function. In the popular consciousness there was a clear distinction between foods reserved for the aristocracy and ordinary foods for peasants. Food – that is its form, preparation and selected ingredients – was thus another component of English court culture, which was based on a juxtaoposition of the opposing notions: of noble refinement and plebeian boorishness. In effect, courtly circles consistently distanced themselves from what was peasant, including foodstuffs associated with the countryside. The perpetuation of existing divisions was facilitated by royal forestry regulations enforced by the Crown officials.[7] As a result, many products, including almost all types of game and fish, were reserved exclusively for the monarch and the aristocracy. Only the king had the right to hunt wild boar, roe, or deer. Names of fish and wild fowl, served at royal feasts and considered exceptionally refined, such as salmon, crane, heron, capon, peacock and swan, appear in literary works of the period under study.

The two basic requirements for a dish to appear on a royal table were its costliness and sophistication. Therefore, the dishes served at court feasts were made from expensive, rare ingredients in order to send a clear message to the royal vassals about the ruler's wealth and power. Luxury products were brought to England from the Far East, so that not only their high cost and uniqueness, but also the charm of remote lands appealed to the imagination of the courtiers. Many believed they grew in the Garden of Eden, and then drifted down the Nile: "And it is said that these things came from the earthly paradise, just as the wind blows down the dry wood in the forests of our own land; and the dry wood of the trees in paradise that thus falls into the river

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[7] Roger of Hoveden, *Gesta regis Henrici Secundi…*, vol. 1, p. 323; Roger of Hoveden, *Chronica…*, vol. 4, p. 63.

is sold to us by the merchants” [Lopez, Raymond 1955: 108–114; qtd in: Labarge 1980: 88]. Similar tales were so widespread in thirteenth-century England that Bartholomeus Anglicus felt obliged to expose their fictitiousness: “These men do feign, to make things dear and of great price” [Bartholomaeus Anglicus 1924: 103]. Spices imported from the East, especially pepper, ginger, saffron and cinnamon, were a symbol of luxury and grandeur of the royal court. They were used for their refined taste and aroma, but also to decorate dishes and change or enhance their colour. Pepper was particularly prized and widely used. Bishop Grosseteste expressed the opinion that “pure pepper was better than ginger in a sauce” [Thomas of Eccleston 1961: 181f.]. Another noble spice was saffron, a favourite of medieval cooks, with which they achieved a deep golden colour in their dishes. Henry II Plantagenet’s courtier, Gerald of Wales relates the fantastic tale of a boy who is taken to a fairy palace and is surprised to find that the entire court “neither ate flesh nor fish, but lived on a milk diet, made up into messes with saffron” [Gerald of Wales 1868: 75–77; transl. 1908: 68f].

The high cost of the food served at royal banquets was related not only to its quality, but also quantity. The abundance of food and the huge number of courses served, as Peter of Blois mentions [Coulton 1976: 246], were a sign of the monarch’s magnificence and largesse. Excess and generosity ennobled the ruler in the eyes of his subjects, which is reflected in the poetic descriptions of King Arthur’s court. The poet extolling its pomp and display, set up an ideal which the rulers of the time could only strain to achieve. At King Arthur’s New Year’s feast, as many as twelve courses were served, with each portion intended for only two guests. The sight of so many dishes left the guests in a state of pleasant bewilderment [*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1925: 122–129]. The table was so richly decorated that it was difficult to find an empty seat. One can get some idea of the splendour of the real court festivities from the produce purchased for the feasts given by John the Lackland in 1211. Treasury records include an impressive list of products, for example: 90 pounds of pepper, 28 pounds of cumin, three pounds of cinnamon, a pound of cloves, half a pound of nutmeg, two pounds of ginger, wine from Auxerre, white wine, French wine, Gascony wine, Andegavian wine, 1450 pounds of almonds, 1500 dates, five baskets of figs, and in addition: 153 pounds of cotton, 60 silk tablecloths from Spain, and 1250 yards (0.9 m) of scarlet cloth [Bartlett 2000: 236].

A thorough reconstruction of the list of dishes served at court feasts and the method of their preparation poses serious difficulties, which is due to several factors. Firstly, the surviving English cookbooks come from a much later period, i.e. from the 14th and 15th centuries [Henisch 1999: 99–146]. Secondly, both, literary works and historical accounts of the time, provide very general information about the food of the upper classes. Thirdly, in an environment where the virtue of moderation was considered a great value, it was bad manners to attach importance to food. The authors of textbooks on court etiquette, Petrus Alfonsi, John of Salisbury and Daniel of Beccles, emphasized the important role of self-restraint in courtier behavior [Alfonsi 1911: 11; John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 8.12, ed. Webb, 2: 233f; Daniel of Beccles line 923]. Lack of moderation and greed were interpreted as typical plebeian behavior. As a re-

sult, the attitude of voluntary renunciation and the publicly demonstrated indifference to food, was a certain cultural pattern, praised by the poets. Thus, the brave knight Erec, before the tournament, "did not allow himself to be gluttonous, three bites of chicken were enough for him" [Johann von Würzburg 1906: lines 15176–15179, qtd in: Bumke 2000: 181]. Similarly, in one of the versions of the poem about Tristan and Isolde, the lovers lived only for love, despising earthly food [Bédier 1968: 353].

As mentioned above, cookbooks containing detailed recipes and sample lists of dishes served at court feasts date from the 14th and 15th centuries. There are, however, important indications that many of the provisions date from a much earlier period. For example, references in twelfth-century manuscripts point to dishes more fully described in much later texts [Hammond 2005: 126]. An example is a dish from Anglo-Norman times called *Mawmenny*. In the original version, it was made of minced beef, pork or mutton, boiled in wine, and served in a sauce made of wine, almonds and capon meat. The sauce was seasoned with cloves and sugar and coloured with indigo or deep red. Approximately a century later, much more sugar was added, beef was replaced with capon and almonds with dates. The color was changed into red orange [Hammond 2005: 127]. The evolution of this dish, which thanks to the Normans, found its way to the tables of English monarchs, may serve as an illustration of the whole process, as a result of which dishes became sweeter, more spicy, and more complicated to prepare. Bridget Henisch sums up the culinary preferences of the English aristocracy in just three words: "color, complication, and cost" [Henisch 1999: 99].

The custom of giving food exotic colors resulted from the strange ambition of medieval cooks to depart as far as possible from the natural appearance of dishes, associated with coarse simplicity and plebeianness. Hammond points out that "The great ambition of the medieval cook was to disguise nature and to turn a fairly bland original into something exotic and piquant" [Hammond 2005: 127f]. This resulted in a huge variety of ingredients and spices used, as well as dyeing dishes in colors associated with royal splendor: gold, purple, or indigo. One example of how medieval cooks wanted to improve nature is found in the account of the English court writer Ralph of Diceto. He describes how the Poitou people prepared the beef: "When the pepper and garlic have been mixed together in a mortar, the fresh meat needs a condiment either in the juice of wild apples, or that of young vine shoots, or grapes" [Gransden 1972: 48]. Dishes served at royal feasts were supposed to enchant all the senses: dazzle with their unique appearance, lure with exotic scent and tempt with original taste.

In view of such a variety and sophisticated form of dishes, it is not surprising that chefs who were masters in their field were highly valued. Dating from the end of the 12th century, the poem *Brut* by the English poet Layamon celebrates the heroic deeds of King Arthur and his knights. The magnificence of the court, however, is not only due to the bravery of the knights, but also to the excellent skills of the royal cooks: King Arthur "had never any cook, that was not champion most good," writes the poet [Layamon 1999: 72; 1963: 65]. Moreover, the characters of sorcery cooks appear in the romance *Huon de Bordeaux*. As soon as the fairies realize they are being

watched, they rush to wipe their cake-stained hands [*Huon of Burdeux* 1883: 408f]. A skilled chef had to be an expert in the culinary arts, able to create exquisite dishes from a huge amount of sophisticated ingredients. Monarchs valued good cooks and rewarded them generously. In 1204 Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine of England granted lands for life to her faithful servant named Adam the Cook.

When the feast was coming to an end, the last point of the court protocol provided for the distribution of generous gifts to the most important guests. The more valuable the gifts, the greater the prestige of the monarch. The generosity of Richard I during the feasts held in Messina is extolled by the poet Ambrose:

> Richard - who is not mean or miserly - gave them [the knights] such great gifts of silver chalices and gilded cups, brought to the knights according to their station, that all men praised him for his fine gifts, those of high, middle and low degree (...). I was present at the feasting ... I have not, it seems to me, seen so many rich gifts given at once time as King Richard gave then, handling over to the King of France and to his people vessels of gold and silver. [Ambroise, lines 1054ff.; Ailes 2003: 46].

The gifts given by Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade were exceptionally generous, as they served to strengthen alliances and to achieve political and military goals. The gifts given by the Plantagenets during feasts in England were not that spectacular. Usually, guests were given silver, gold or gilded goblets, jewels, expensive fabrics or costumes. What is more, as we are informed by the poets, sometimes even the very invitation to the feast involved an implication of expensive gifts. In one of the lays by Marie de France, King Arthur, on the occasion of Pentecost "gave many rich gifts to his counts and barons, and to the Knights of the Round Table. Never were such worship and bounty shown before at any feast." When Lanval does not receive any gifts, he realizes that he has fallen out of favour and that he must leave Camelot immediately [Marie de France 2003: 61f]. Giving gifts had a deep symbolic function, as it was an expression of the monarch's magnanimity, nobility and largesse. The ability to share with others was a virtue propagated by court clerics and highly valued by poets.

In conclusion, the great feasts held at the Plantagenet court were closely related to the nature of royal power. At a time when permanent residences had not yet fully developed, lavish celebrations held at Church holidays were an excellent opportunity to gather the most important vassals at the monarch's court and to strenghten mutual ties. The splendor of the feasts, extolled by both, the poets and court chroniclers, had also an important cultural function. The decor of the dining room, the sophistication of the dishes as well as the wealth of the gifts, established a cultural model gradually taken over by the English nobility. In effect, the ideal of lavish feasting, propagated by twelfth and thirteenth century court writers, was an important element of court culture, serving as a covenient tool to popularize refined norms of behaviour. In effect, the early Plantagenet period was distinguished by the splendor of material culture and a new awareness of elaborate norms of behaviour. What is more, through the type of food eaten and the observance of court ceremonial at the table, the court circles ex-

pressed their separateness from other strata of society, lower in the feudal hierarchy and unfamiliar with court etiquette. The role of poets in this process should not be underestimated, as the descriptions of sumptuous feasts recorded in Arthurian literature strongly appealed to popular imagination and filled in the gaps in the historical accounts of the period.

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