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Response to Veronika Grimm's review of **Bonnie Effros**, *Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul*.

By Bonnie Effros, Binghamton University.

In her review of *Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul*, Veronika Grimm has raised a number of provocative issues related to my study of foodways in the early Middle Ages. As a classicist who has written extensively on feasting and fasting in early christianity and late antiquity, Grimm appreciates the topics raised by my discussion. Her strongest criticisms of my book, however, do not directly address my analysis of customs related to food and drink in Merovingian Gaul. Rather, she questions two underlying premises upon which my book is based. The first is my general assumption that, by the sixth century, the vast majority of the inhabitants of Gaul were baptized Christians. The second is my use of hagiographical sources to assess a variety of forms of behavior related to food and drink; the most important of these discussions in my monograph focuses on gender roles with respect to abstinence and consumption. Therefore, I find myself in the unusual position of defending not my book but rather the generally accepted parameters and methods of my field.

Although there is not complete agreement on the process by which conversion occurred in early medieval Gaul, and certainly no one argues any longer that this happened universally with Clovis's dramatic embrace of the faith in the late fifth or early sixth century, historians specializing in this period have reached consensus that the Frankish population of most of Gaul were in fact baptized christians by the mid-sixth century at the very latest. The Gallo-Romans had been christian far longer.[1] What is more disputed, however, is what Christianization in fact meant in this period beyond the rite of baptism. Interpretations of the sources, or the lack thereof, vary from confidence in the availability of priests throughout the life-cycle,[2] to the suggestion that the number and type of rituals formally performed by priests was highly circumscribed in the lives of most christians.[3] Some have even argued that clerics on occasion incorporated pagan custom into Christian rites in this period.[4] I tend toward the middle view and believe that becoming Christian likely had little impact on recent converts' lifestyles; they probably received little or no instruction at baptism and the existence of parish churches was not widespread. My reading of contemporary sources of all types leads me to surmise while conversion may have altered their views about the nature of God and the afterlife, the rhythm of their daily lives was barely changed by this new religious orientation.[5]

Grimm's main objection to assumptions about the Christian orientation of the inhabitants of Gaul relates most specifically to my discussion of archaeological discoveries of food and drink vessels, along with evidence of their perishable contents in some instances, in early medieval graves (chapter five). She suggests that the similarities of this rite to burial customs prevalent in Roman antiquity imply that those who practiced them must not have been Christian. Although she appropriately acknowledges the contradictions that exist between the early medieval historical and archaeological sources, she depends upon classical sources in this instance to interpret the material record. This confidence in a continuity of belief over the courses of many centuries is problematic at best. As I have pointed out with respect to

Merovingian funerary custom, written sources in the early medieval period have very little to say about the deposition of food and drink in contemporary graves. What clerics in Gaul did condemn repeatedly in the sixth and seventh centuries was the use of funerals as an opportunity for excessive drunkenness and revelry in cemeteries (pp.76-77).

Beyond this effort to keep up appearances in Christian cemeteries, no legislation survives to suggest that grave depositions of any sort, whether of food, clothing, weaponry, or objects, were considered pagan before the Carolingian period, with the possible exception of horse or animal depositions.[6] Lay legislation, to the contrary, included numerous measures intended to protect these items from theft.[7] While clerics did ban the burial of liturgical objects, they did not include any other artifacts in this category of prohibited goods.[8] Moreover, many of the most lavish burials, including those with food, have been discovered in the context of churches.[9] The existence of such prominent graves suggests that either pagans were being buried in cathedrals or that food and drink depositions were recognized as a routine aspect of Christian mortuary ritual in this period. The latter seems the most logical conclusion regarding how to read the archaeological evidence. From what we know about early medieval society, it is far more likely that these efforts were aimed at impressing the living instead of provisioning the dead for the afterlife.

With respect to the second area of criticism addressed in the review, Grimm expresses doubt that saints' *vitae* may be used as historical sources. As there is already a sizeable literature on the appropriate application of hagiographical sources to historical discussions of the early Middle Ages,[10] I will limit my response to the specifics of her argument as they relate to my book. As to my use of saints' lives in discussing the interactions of religious women with food and drink, Grimm claims these fantastical accounts were originally created by clerical authors as a form of propaganda aimed at "instilling...guilt and shame into the minds of comfortable, complaisant or rich Christians." She is thus skeptical of the possibility that such biased works can be used to promote the idea that religious women achieved power or authority in the early Middle Ages. While I am in agreement that these sources do represent to varying degrees sacred fictions,[11] the messages that they conveyed nonetheless had great relevance to contemporary audiences whether or not they were believed in their entirety or in detail. If they had not been rooted to some degree in realities of the period, there would have been no point in writing them since few would have believed them. Just as the theological writings upon which Grimm is dependent in her own analysis of early Christian foodways,[12] hagiographical literature sought to shape Christian interaction with food and drink through example.

Thus, while we may dismiss Venantius Fortunatus's near contemporary descriptions of Saint Radegund's fasting as an extreme attempt to force her behavior into late antique models of holy abstinence, we should not underestimate the relevance of this text for the nuns of Merovingian Gaul (chapter three). Modified but not entirely refuted by Baudonivia, a member of Radegund's cloister, this impossibly high standard of abstinence was moderated by accounts of the practical applications of these activities. The nun showed the saint manipulating self-privation for a variety of objectives, and thereby suggested that nuns in Radegund's house were cognizant of the power and authority that might be gained through extreme forms of self-deprivation. The same attitudes, albeit with the promotion of more moderate forms of behavior, were true of contemporary saints' lives focused on the way in which monks and bishops interacted with food and drink. Their handling of these precious commodities was one of the few means by which they could express their difference from and superiority to their heavily armed lay counterparts (chapter two).

As Veronika Grimm notes in her review, the greatest challenges I faced in writing this book were the paucity of written sources and the difficulty in interpreting the archaeological record. Because of the shortcomings of the evidence, I was forced to limit myself for the most part to a discussion of clerical attitudes toward the ritual use of food and drink; nor did contemporary sources lend themselves to an analysis of the mores of any groups aside from the elite. Nonetheless, even with these restraints, the

patterns of behavior that emerged from the early medieval texts and material evidence were convincing, at least to me, of the importance of the display, manipulation, and control of food and drink stuffs in the expression of power, identity, and exclusivity. While clerics claimed themselves removed from this world, their writings nonetheless suggested their underlying recognition of the necessity of shaping perceptions of their interactions with these items in the successful enactment of their authority.

NOTES

[1] Eugen Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Frankenreich* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1988); Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (London: Longman, 1994).

[2] See, for instance: Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481-751* (Brill: E.J. Brill, 1995).

[3] Éric Rebillard, *In hora mortis: Évolution de la pastoral de la mort au IVe et Ve siècle dans l'Occident latin* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1994).

[4] Valerie I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[5] Bonnie Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

[6] Bailey K. Young, "Paganisme, christianisation et rites funéraires mérovingiens," *Archéologie médiévale* 7 (1977): 5-81.

[7] Herbert Jankuhn, Hermann Nehlsen, and Helmut Roth, eds., "Zum Grabfrevel in vor-und frühgeschichtlicher Zeit: Untersuchungen zu Grabraub und Haugbrot," in *Mittel-und Nordeuropa, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, philologisch-historische Klasse*, 3d ser., no. 113 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).

[8] Donald Bullough, "Burial, Community, and Belief in the Early Medieval World," in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, edited by Patrick Wormald (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 177-201.

[9] Otto Doppelfeld, "Die Domgrabung XI: Das fränkische Frauengrab," *Kölner Domblatt* 16-17 (1959): 41-78; Otto Doppelfeld, "Die Domgrabung XIV: Das Inventar des fränkische Knabengrabes," *Kölner Domblatt* 21-22 (1963): 49-68.

[10] Two introductory pieces with a methodological focus include: Paul Fouracre, "Merovingian History and Merovingian Hagiography," *Past and Present* 127 (1990): 3-38; Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: Hagiographical Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994): 95-113.

[11] I have borrowed this phrase from the incredibly insightful: Lynda Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

[12] Veronika E. Grimm, *From Feasting to Fasting, The Evolution of a Sin: Attitudes to Food in Late Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1996).

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