

Choosing human flesh? A few medieval peculiarities and the debates of contemporary research

Vincent VANDENBERG

Aspirant du FNRS – Université Libre de Bruxelles
ULB CP 175/01
Avenue F. D. Roosevelt 50, 1050 Bruxelles (Belgique)
vincent.vandenberg@ulb.ac.be

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ABSTRACT

For more than thirty years now, the research field of cannibalism has known many interesting developments and even sometimes a few bitter arguments. Far from intending to settle the matter, I would just like here to bring up a few medieval elements that could shed a new light on the long tradition and fascination with cannibalism in the West. The complex issue of survival cannibalism illustrates the particular meaning of the theme in a Christian context, while the case of a cannibal king of England underlines the possible existence of “good” cannibals. Such is also the conclusion when examining the strange story of a Christian Saint drinking the blood of her martyr children. But the most “usual” cannibal cannot be avoided, he who dwells in the most remote regions of the known world. A glance through the late medieval description of the world written by John of Mandeville shows how much cannibalism was a common feature of some barely known or completely imaginary people. Thus are created the different categories of cannibalism still widely used today (culinary, funerary, warfare, exo- and endocannibalism), long before Columbus knew of the Cariba.

KEY WORDS

Cannibalisme,
anthropophagie,
Moyen Âge,
famine,
Richard I d'Angleterre,
Saint Aréthas,
Jean de Mandeville

RÉSUMÉ

Faire le choix de la chair humaine ? Quelques cas particuliers médiévaux autour du débat de la recherche contemporaine

Depuis maintenant plus de trente ans, le domaine de recherche du cannibalisme a connu de nombreux développements intéressants et même parfois d'après discussions. Loin de prétendre régler la question, je souhaite ici amener quelques éléments médiévaux qui pourraient jeter une lumière nouvelle sur la longue tradition et la fascination envers le cannibalisme en Occident. Le cas complexe du cannibalisme de survie illustre la signification particulière du thème dans un contexte chrétien, tandis que le cas d'un roi

MOTS CLÉS

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d'Angleterre cannibale met en évidence l'existence possible de « bons » cannibales. Telle est également la conclusion après examen de l'histoire étrange d'une sainte chrétienne buvant le sang de ses filles martyres. Mais l'on ne peut passer sous silence le cannibale le plus « habituel », lui qui vit dans les régions les plus éloignées du monde connu. Un coup d'œil dans la description du monde écrite par Jean de Mandeville à la fin du Moyen Âge montre à quel point le cannibalisme était un attribut fréquent de populations à peine connues, voire totalement imaginaires. Ainsi sont créées les diverses catégories de cannibalisme encore largement en usage aujourd'hui (gastronomique, funéraire, guerrière, exo- et endocannibalisme), bien avant que Christophe Colomb n'entende parler des Cariba.

As a medievalist, I somehow felt slightly exotic, having the opportunity to present a few results of my researches in front of an audience mainly composed of archaeologists or anthropologists whose interests do not really lie in medieval textual or iconographic material. It was even more of a surprise, however, to note that I was the only one talking about anthropophagy (or cannibalism, I will not create any subtle distinction between these two equally anachronistic terms here: the medieval West did not have a single word to describe the eating of human flesh by man, and, moreover, it seems to me quite arbitrary and fruitless to assign a different and exclusive meaning to each one of these common words, as some have tried. This would just, in my perspective, create confusion and focus the debate on concepts rather than on facts), when all sorts of meats, the usual and less usual ones, were the main concern. My aim in this paper is obviously not to give a full image of the phenomenon, a really too vast and complicated field, but rather to emphasize a few neglected aspects. I will focus on some cases situated in a medieval occidental context, insisting on the modes and motives of the consumption. By doing so, I hope to show first that the cannibal is not necessarily located far away and, even more than this, that he may sometimes appear as a “good cannibal” or even be good because he is a cannibal. Hence the polemic question of the choice, introduced in my title: even starving, most people would not resort to cannibalism, but some choose, to a certain extent, to do

so. Others might make the same choice to distinguish themselves, voluntarily or not, from the non-cannibal masses, and still being praised for it. Finally, I will try modestly to shed some light, through my remarks, on the larger debates about cannibalism still taking place in fields like archaeology or anthropology.

During the year 868, the territories constituting today's France are stricken by a severe famine. In its story of these contemporaneous events, the author of the *Annals of Sainte-Colombe de Sens* (Pertz 1826: 103) emphasizes the ravages induced by hunger in Burgundy. He exclaims, insisting on the fright such news should cause the reader, “men and women, horror!, killed and ate other people”. The annalist fortunately carries on in his depiction of these behaviours and gives some details about this survival cannibalism. Here it is, quite literally translated: “Indeed, in Pontus Sirciacus someone killed an honest woman welcomed by hospitality, and, dividing her member by member, put her in the salt, and cooked her so as to eat her with his children. In the same place, a woman did the same with a young boy. In many other places also, the rumour spreading, it is said that it happened because of hunger”. The author reveals the source of these stories: the rumour, which brought to Sens tales of cannibalism whose main stage is set in a small locality a few kilometres away. This document is also exceptional for the place it gives to the time between the murder/slaughter and the consumption. We learn indeed that the victim is dismem-

bered, then that the flesh is salted and cooked (roasted or boiled, we don't know) before being served to the whole family. So, human flesh is here processed in the same way any other animal meat would be.

It is essential here to focus on the narrative strategy adopted by the author. In the high medieval West, stories of survival cannibalism can be divided into two main categories, following the depiction of an either too human or on the contrary too animal behaviour: my first example comes from the first category, which plays on the transformation from human flesh to usual meat, focusing on the cutting up, the preserving, the preparation or even the selling or the preferential choice. These two last aspects appear in the famous depiction of the famine of 1032-1033 provided by the monk Raoul Glaber (Arnoux 1996: 240-245). He tells us abundantly about the cannibalism of the people of his time and finishes like this: "We came to such madness that abandoned cattle was less in danger of being surprised than men. As if eating man had become usual, someone was seen bringing cooked human flesh at the market in Tournus, as he would have done with any other animal". The author insists here heavily on the inversion, caused by famine, of the normal state of things, an inversion which had even left the world of disorganized survival strategies to become a real organized food practice.

The other prevailing medieval way of presenting survival cannibalism is the antithesis of the first one. It is characterized by an emphasis on the act of consumption, directly following the eventual evocation of the murder, without referring to any kind of food preparation. The text frequently compares men with beasts and makes use of a carefully chosen vocabulary, full of gritting teeth and flesh ripped apart. Two different approaches certainly, the first a parody of usual food practices, the other a portrait of an inhuman savagery. But they share the same goal: creating a strong reaction among the readers. This reaction is besides more complex than could be expected *a priori*. Indeed, if in each case there is a clear will to suggest horror and disgust, we never find implied a clear moral condemnation of the starving cannibals. In short, the act itself is rejected because it is abominable, but its authors are in a way protected from excessive

reproaches thanks to their motive: unbearable hunger (Vandenberg 2008).

The relative tolerance, during the Middle Ages and later, towards the consumption of unusual foods during severe food shortages is well documented (Bonnassie 2001). Survival cannibalism is, however, a bit special, first because its practice is rarely explicitly tolerated, or at least forgiven, then because man and its flesh are not included in the list of unclean foods transmitted by the Old Testament. Cannibalism is thus missing, in particular, in medieval penitentials (Vogel 1978: 111) and if Christian precedents had to be found, it is in the Bible and in ancient history that one would have to look. The few biblical tales of survival cannibalism and the *War of the Jews* written by Flavius Josephus (first century AD) (Savinell 1977: 491-492), a work widely known during the Middle Ages, have given a particular meaning to that practice, by making it the result of a divine punishment. So, the story told by Josephus of a mother killing and roasting her child before eating half of it and keeping the rest to show it to her torturers, all this happening during the siege of Jerusalem by Roman troops in 70 AD, has been interpreted by the medieval Christian tradition as an irrefutable consequence of the divine punishment inflicted by God on the Jewish people (Chapman 2000, Price 2003). Survival cannibalism has therefore probably to be considered, like famines and epidemics, as appearing to a learned medieval Christian as a kind of divine scourge. And it is essential to keep that in mind while trying to uncover the meaning or the truth of medieval stories of cannibalism. So, strictly speaking, it frequently does not appear as a human behaviour in itself but more as a curse employing man as its tool. Man eats man because there is no other choice for him, the breaking of the taboo is in no way a conscious one, it is rather the inescapable consequence of his sins (Vandenberg 2008).

That being said, what is then the truth about survival cannibalism? In medieval texts, this kind of behaviour appears regularly, but, as pointed before, presented in a stereotyped way and, what's more, frequently used to insist on the presence of a divine punishment in a particular context. So, if the written material indeed informs us about the way survival cannibalism is thought about, or

about the fears it causes, it is however quite difficult to establish the real frequency of the practice or its concrete aspects. This admission of failure is true for the Middle Ages as well as for the present time. People studying food shortages happening or having happened all over the world more or less readily admit the reality of a limited resort to human flesh as food during these hard times (the cases of sailors lost at sea [Simpson 1994] and the like must be treated separately, as they may create a form of “accelerated famine”, out of social bounds, where cannibalism is sometimes the only short-term way to survive).

But hunger is difficult to study: it breaks social links, isolates groups and people inside these groups, exacerbates pre-existing tensions and more than anything blurs the perception of reality of those suffering from it, but also of those getting in contact with them (Dirks 1980). The structure and principles of a starving human group are deeply affected and it would be logical in such a context to consider that cannibalism may become a conceivable behaviour. Most of the time, however, it only appears in the fears and fantasies of suffering people, easily affected by rumours in this state of distress. Hunger leads humanity to a kind of borderline state where it fears to become cannibal itself, to become in-human. Rationality has no place in such a context and, as a consequence, objective facts are generally lacking to allow us to comprehend the experience of hunger in its full complexity.

My current researches are not limited to survival cannibalism but include any kind of appearance of the anthropophagic theme in the medieval West, with great attention to other periods and regions. Whatever the time or place, one has to admit that the cannibal rarely gets the good part in any story. But it would be really naive to consider the elusive theme of cannibalism to be so monolithic. The monstrous cannibal has its positive counterpart in the cannibal hero. Inversion processes offer regularly the image of cannibals being more noble, powerful, pious or funny thanks to their strange diet.

King Richard I of England (1157-1199), the famous Lionheart, has been made a hero, as time went by, through various stories and legends, not unlike King Arthur. One of the most striking legends uses as a stage the Third Crusade and is told in the

Richard Cœur de Lion (Brunner 1913: 3088-3562), a late work written in middle English in the early fourteenth century. An episode of particular interest takes place during the siege of Acre, while Saladin tries to protect the city. Shortly before a battle, Richard is suddenly struck by a fever which keeps him in his tent. During his convalescence, he is taken by an irrepressible craving for pork meat, but such a food cannot be found easily in Muslim territory. An old knight gives the solution to the king's cook. The latter kills a young Saracen and cooks him with great care before serving him to the king. The author even gives the recipe: the victim is slaughtered fast, emptied of its innards and skinned, then put to boil with flour, spices and finally saffron to give it a good colour. And in order not to let anything go to waste, it is suggested to make a soup with the head.

The result is spectacular, the meal and a good nap revive the king, who immediately takes his weapons and inflicts heavy losses to his enemies. But as he comes back starving from the fight, he asks his cook the head of the pork he had eaten before. The servant is finally forced to obey and brings the young Saracen's head. Richard suddenly bursts into a big laugh and rejoices at establishing that the flesh of Saracens tastes so good. He therefore concludes that his army should no longer fear hunger as long as there are Saracens available. After the battle, peace talks are undertaken. Saladin sends presents which are refused by the English king, but he nevertheless invites the ambassadors for a meal. He orders the most noble prisoners to be picked and beheaded, and then to have the shaved heads boiled and served to himself and the envoys, with the name of each victim. Deeply dreaded, the guests fear they might suffer the same fate, but Richard orders more usual foods to be brought before sending them back to Saladin with a message warning that cutting the supply lines of the Christian army would be of no use, considering the abundant availability of the flesh of Saracens.

The content of this story is truly difficult to explain. It is, after all, a work entirely dedicated to the glory of a proud English cannibal king. Some passages are indeed openly comic but the tendency to glorification still remains. The deep contempt in which the text holds the Saracens (likened to

the food they reject, an attitude quite common towards Jews, too [Fabre-Vassas 1994]) undoubtedly softens the horror of anthropophagy, since the victims are so despised that they nearly do not appear human anymore. However, it is also clear that cannibalism is here used by the author as a strategic element aiming at the promotion of a proper English identity, clearly separated from the “Others”, be they Muslim or French (the main opponents of the English in the story). I fully agree with Alan Ambrisco when he concludes that, for Richard and for the poet, cannibalism shows just how far the English are willing to go to accomplish their divinely inspired task. “The English are cannibalistic and barbaric; the French, to their deep discredit, are neither” (Ambrisco 1999: 516, Cordery 2002, Conklin Akbari 2005, Blurton 2007: 120-131).

As such, this king Richard with his unusual appetite appears as a distant figure, almost legendary, and not really as a model of Christian behaviour. There would be much to say about the strange relationship of the Catholic Church with cannibalism, since the doctrine of transubstantiation implies that the host and wine of the Eucharist truly become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. What could appear today as an abstract theological subtlety has given birth through time to many stories and behaviours staging this true presence. Drinking warm human blood can in this way become a deeply pious act. Here is a striking example, coming from the early medieval Greek world. The *Martyrdom of Saint Arethas and his companions* (BHG 166) (Detoraki 2007), a hagiographic text dating from the sixth century, tells the misfortunes befalling the inhabitants of the Christian city of Najrân, in southern Arabia, in 523 AD. The city is conquered by a Jewish king who orders Christians to abandon their faith. As is usual in that kind of stories, a few Christian heroes emerge. A noble widow and her two daughters are amongst the main protagonists. A verbal confrontation ensues between the widow and the king, but when one of the daughters spits at his face, he has both of them beheaded in front of their mother. A surprising scene is then described by the hagiographer: “The king orders their blood to be collected in the palms of some assistants and then brought to their holy mother. She tasted and

said: I thank You, Son of God, for having made your servant happy and having judged me worthy to taste the sacrifice of my daughters”.

It is in a way a good sacrifice, a voluntary sacrifice, leading to a pious cannibalism, as opposed to bad sacrifices, leading to an evil cannibalism, practiced by witches or Jews accused of killing innocent Christian children. The fringe elements of society, real or imaginary, are suspected of devoting themselves to practices endangering the society’s balance and corrupting its functioning. The cannibalism practiced by some Saints confirms that they are out of the ordinary, placed between God and the Christians. Marginal cannibalism makes you out of the ordinary too, but in a bad and dangerous way, at the other end of what is humanity. A kind of structure of a Christian society is built in this way, in which the cannibal behaviour is able to exclude as well as to integrate or promote.

All these “inside” cannibals have their “outside” counterparts, those living on the edges of the known world. The definition of the borders of a “normal” humanity is thus based in part on the inhuman behaviour of human flesh consumption. From Herodotus onwards, the Barbarians inhabiting the northern regions of Europe or Asia are known as man-eaters. Pliny the Elder (Schilling 1977: 39-48), in the first century AD, carries out a short inventory of people with strange customs and monstrous men living far from the Mediterranean. He tells of these northern Scythian tribes eating human flesh and drinking from human skulls. He considers such practices as brutish, compares them to human sacrifices, and concludes that nature made things so that all the existing evils are also present in man. Solinus (Mommsen 1895: 82), writing in the third century AD and drawing on previous authors, presents again the Scythians, explaining that their neighbours had left their lands, too frightened as they were by their cannibalism, presented as a *nefarius ritus*, an impious rite, suggesting that Solinus gives it a mainly religious significance. He even adds that they commonly drink blood from the wounds of their dead enemies. It is also important to emphasize that, in ancient texts, *Anthropophagi* is an ethnonym which designates one or several populations on the basis of a supposedly charac-

teristic behaviour, which is not uncommon in this embryonic ethnography where imagination and tradition play an essential role.

During the Middle Ages, this idea of “boundaries cannibals” will be maintained and refined, being easily adapted to the evolution of the geographical knowledge. Turks and, in particular, Mongols (Guzman 1991) were sometimes accused of being man-eaters, while they were getting close to Europe. The “geography” written by John of Mandeville (Deluz 2000) in the fourteenth century, a great and enduring success, is a good point of reference to evaluate the importance of the cannibal imagination before Christopher Columbus discovered the first real Cannibal, named after a native Caribbean tribe. In Mandeville, there are several man-eaters, be they human or anthropomorphic. People from Sumatra, he says, have the “bad custom” of buying and fattening children before eating them, saying that it is for them “the best and mildest thing in the world”. Near Java, he tells about people using dogs to strangle sick people and eating the victims, “instead of game”. A bit farther live aggressive people drinking the blood of their enemies. The inhabitants of Nicobar, who are cynocephals, that is men with dog heads, eat their foes. We find funerary cannibalism again on another island, whose inhabitants suffocate sick people and then organize a great feast with their friends where they eat the victim, motivated by compassion, to avoid unnecessary sufferings. Tartars, for their part, have a reputation for cooking the ears of their victims in vinegar, to make a prized meal. Last but not least, Mandeville describes the funerary customs in Tibet: the body of the deceased is left in the open to be eaten by birds, while his head is cooked and eaten by all the guests.

Such a listing shows how much anthropophagy is a common attribute of distant and unknown people. It also interestingly summarizes the different categories of cannibalism clearly identified in the West long before the age of the great geographical explorations: Exo- and endocannibalism, warfare, funerary or culinary cannibalism. These categories, still the most used by anthropologists (Lindenbaum 2004), precede and inevitably condition the first contact of the West with the New World and the views resulting from it.

For more than thirty years now, anthropologists tear each other apart about the value that should be given to the huge modern and contemporary material about cannibalism. And this happens in debates where ideological struggles frequently overtake the necessities of scientific objectivity. Scepticism about cannibalism is generally stronger amongst archaeologists, although they too are confronted with some troubling evidence. Some specialists claim to be able to identify cannibalism thanks to several signs left on human bone remains (Turner 1999). This however turns out to be quite questionable, since in most cases it cannot be proven that a consumption followed the treatment of the human bodies (Peter-Röcher 1994, Boulestin 1999). It will undoubtedly be a long time before a full objective approach of the universal problem of cannibalism can be attempted. Historians, anthropologists and archaeologists will have to work hard to go beyond their deep methodological disagreements and finally understand if, why and how man eats man and how it comes that he is so frightened and at the same time so fascinated by it.

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