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**Feast, Famine and Eating ‘Every Nauseous Thing’:
Portrayals of Food in the *Primary Chronicle***

The purpose of this work is to examine the relationship between the culture of the Rus’ people and depictions of food as they appear in the early twelfth-century record of Russia’s earliest history, known as the *Primary Chronicle*. This will show various types and uses of food, what its portrayal means for the narrative itself and why it may be represented this way due to religious and political realities in contemporary Kievan culture. The portrayal of food in this work has only been specifically discussed in Horace G. Lunt’s “Food in the Primary Chronicle”¹. However, this work examines the use of food in the collected stories as a linguistic exercise and provides little literary analysis. I will examine these portrayals in order to show food as an implement of power which may be wielded or withheld just as a warrior-king chooses when to deploy his sword and when to stay it. Discussion of food items in various Biblical materials (e.g. psalms, Proverbs) which are repeated herein will be omitted in order to focus on those which reflect Rus’ mentalities toward food rather than those of the Bible; specifically, Rus’ mentalities toward food that were emerging or prevalent by the twelfth century when it was written down. This project will examine the matter of food in the *Primary Chronicle* in order to shed new light on selected evidence of prestige, social status and godliness (or ungodliness) visible in foodstuffs; in other words, the power on one’s plate.

The *Primary Chronicle*, for all its many references to the Church and the teachings of God, is also primarily concerned with the lineage of the Kievan princes of Novgorod, beginning with the invitation given to Rurik by the Chuds, the Slavs, the Krivichians, and the Ves’ in 862 A.D. to rule their land and bring order to it². From there, the line proceeds to the contemporary time, to Vladimir II Monomakh (r. 1113–1125). Given that the story of the Rus’ rulers of Kiev begins

1 Horace G. Lunt, “Food in the Russian Primary Chronicle,” *Food in Russian History and Culture*, ed. by Musya Glants and Joyce Stetson Toomre (Indianapolis, 1997).

2 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, ed. by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Wetzorthe (Cambridge, MA, 1953), 59.

in strife, it is not difficult to guess that war and the attendant rituals of peacemaking feature heavily in the narrative. Horace G. Lunt records, "some 125 items (37 % of the inventory) deal with war and its immediate participants, while negotiations and peace treaties are dealt with in 15 items, only 7 percent of the text"³. The first episode which features food shows that not only is food supply an important element of war, but it can be used to defeat an enemy by any clever person, not only those at the peak of society. The 997 entry begins with a story of the Rus' fighting their long-standing enemies, the Pechenegs⁴: "When Vladimir went to Novgorod after upland troops with which to fight the Pechenegs (for there was desperate and constant conflict with them) ... They allowed no sally from the city, and great famine prevailed"⁵. On the verge of starvation and surrender, a wise old man instructs them to take oats, wheat, bran and honey, burying it in tubs in the ground so that it appeared that they had food supplies coming from the earth itself. Upon showing their "feast of plenty" to their enemies and allowing them to taste the food, the Pechenegs raised the siege and returned home. Horace G. Lunt observes,

Food in [this] episode is an immediate matter of life and death, and therefore special enough to merit the attention of chroniclers. The Belgorod siege belongs to a type of war strategem that goes back to Herodotus: trucking the enemy into the belief that unlimited food is available and therefore a siege would be tantamount to wasted effort. ...[i]t does illustrate the banal fact that food supplies can be a source of power.⁶

There are other scenes in the *Chronicle* where food is used to deceive an enemy, specifically into lowering one's guard. During a brutal attack on their coastline with approximately 2000 ships, the Greeks offered surrender if Oleg promises not to destroy the city, then, continuing the ruse of submission, "[they] brought out to him food and wine, but he would not accept it, for it was mixed with poison. Then the Greeks were terrified, and exclaimed, "This is not Oleg, but St. Demetrius, whom God has sent upon us"⁷. This attempt failed, and, in fact, added to the intended victim's prestige rather than the poisoners'; Oleg is compared to St. Demetrius, a great military leader and holy figure.

In another example after the death of her husband Igor at the hands of the Derevlians, Olga plans a series of gruesome deaths for the envoys sent to bid her to marry their Prince Mal. She then professes a desire to hold a funeral feast for her husband in their city and as the text describes:

3 Horace G. Lunt, "Food in the Russian Primary Chronicle," 16.

4 *Constantine Porphyrogenitus De Administrando Imperio*, ed. by Gy. Moravcsik, trans. R.J.H. Jenkins (Washington, D.C., 1967), 61; Horace G. Lunt, "Food in the Russian Primary Chronicle," 16.

5 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 122.

6 Horace G. Lunt, "Food in the Russian Primary Chronicle," 21.

7 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 64.

the Derevlians sat down to drink [mead], and Olga bade her followers wait upon them. ... When the Derevlians were drunk, she bade her followers fall upon them, and went about herself egging on her retinue to the massacre of the Derevlians. So they cut down five thousand of them; but Olga returned to Kiev and prepared an army to attack the survivors⁸.

Olga's actions are particularly vicious because, throughout human history, sharing a meal is a meaningful act. Food historians Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari note, "Eating together was a sign of communion and identity, of belonging to the same group"⁹. Strictly speaking, once a meal has been shared, an enemy is no longer just an enemy. In addition, Olga's actions violate ideas which were consolidated in the later medieval period as hospitality. By instructing her followers to serve the Derevlians, she creates an illusion of submission, as the Greeks did when they served food to Oleg in the example above. However, her actions belie her true intentions and violate the implicit safety of shared meal. Sarah Gordon explains, "Hospitality is more than an obligation to feed and entertain a guest. Providing food, along with shelter and safety, not only addresses a guest's needs, it creates a connection between guest and host, facilitating their interaction on other levels"¹⁰. Like the Greeks, Olga's need for vengeance against her enemy is too great and she uses food as a vehicle for mayhem rather than for its usual purpose of diplomacy. In any case, her power was undeniable, having killed thousands of her enemies in a series of schemes such as this one in retaliation for the death of her husband.

An abundance of food also indicates social and religious power; in times when food shortage was a real possibility (as discussed below), the highest ranking members of a given society had the easiest access to a great amount and variety of food, which they could choose to share with others as a display of their status. The first example of this in the *Chronicle* comes after Oleg frightens the Greeks with his easy rejection of poisoned food, going on to negotiate the following terms: "The Russes who come hither shall receive as much grain as they require. Whosoever come as merchants shall receive supplies for six months, including bread, wine, meat, fish, and fruit"¹¹, as well as other supplies.

This behavior fits with what is known historically of the social and political structure of Russia. George Vernadsky notes,

The Varangian princes were followed by their retinue (druzhina) which formed the ruling class of the new state in the same way as did the *Gefolgshaft* (antrustiones) of the German kings and dukes who established their control over Central and Western Europe

8 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 80.

9 *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, trans. Albert Sonnenfeld (New York, 2013), 190.

10 Sarah Gordon, *Culinary Comedy in Medieval French Literature* (West Lafayette, 2007).

11 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 64–5.

in the course of the period from the sixth to the tenth century. It was the antrustiones who contributed most toward the establishment of the feudal regime in most of the countries of Mediaeval Europe. The druzhina of the Kievan princes can be expected to have played the same role in Russia, and to a certain extent they actually did play such a role. It was chiefly from the druzhina that the landowning aristocracy of Mediaeval Russia, the boyars, emerged¹².

In a feudal system such as this, charity was necessary to secure the loyalty of one's men. John W. Baldwin notes,

By waging endemic warfare, these leaders amassed great wealth from pillage and booty. They secured authority for themselves through distribution of these riches to their military supporters and churchmen. ... Lords channeled wealth through gifts, and the latter were expected to respond with counter-gifts, thus creating a vast network of gift exchange. Wealth was distributed ostentatiously, without restraint. The supreme virtue in this economy was largesse, or generosity¹³.

Likewise, Oleg's descendant Prince Vladimir the Great makes several lavish displays of food. Notably, he founds a church after escaping the most hated Rus' enemy, the Pechenegs, once again. In celebration, he "made ready a great festival, for which he caused to be brewed three hundred kettles of mead" along with giving three hundred grivny each to the poor¹⁴. Not only magnanimous, but in character with a man who declared that drinking "is the joy of the Russes. We cannot exist without that pleasure"¹⁵, and thus chose Christianity as his religion over Islam due to their inability to imbibe alcohol or eat pork. (Circumcision was not appealing to the prince either, causing him to reject Judaism.) In another scene, he was so inspired by the teachings of the *Scripture* regarding giving unto the poor that he showered them with food and drink, loading wagons with "bread, meat, fish, various fruits, mead in casks, and kvass"¹⁶, to be delivered to the weak and destitute. In addition, Vladimir ordered "a feast to be prepared each Sunday in his palace for his subjects, and invited the boyars, the court officers, the centurions, the decurions, and the distinguished citizens, either in the presence of the Prince or in his absence. There was much meat, beef, and game, and an abundance of all victuals"¹⁷. It is interesting to note that a variety of items, from bread to fruit, are mentioned in regards to the poor, yet meat is emphasized in the banquet for the nobles. Bridget Ann Henisch comments, "[t]he dinner tables of the powerful were laden with meat dishes of every kind; on fast days, fish, the accepted substitute,

12 George Vernadsky, "Feudalism in Russia," *Speculum*, 14: 3 (July 1939), 309.

13 John W. Baldwin, *Aristocratic Life in Medieval France: The Romances of Jean Renart and Gerbert De Montreuil, 1190–1230* (Baltimore, 2000), 98.

14 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 121.

15 *Ibid.*, 84.

16 *Ibid.*, 121.

17 *Ibid.*, 122.

was offered in the same variety and abundance¹⁸. This is, of course, in addition to bounty of a religious nature, which is mentioned in the *Chronicle* through such holy days as the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God, the Feast of St. Theodore, and the Feast of St. Lazarus¹⁹.

In fact, the son of the devious Olga, whose acts are discussed above, mentions some food items as being particularly valuable. Svyatoslav desires to leave his mother and take up residence on the Danube, “where all riches are concentrated; gold, silks, wine, and various fruits from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Rus’ furs, wax, honey, and slaves”²⁰. It can be assumed that wine, honey and Greek fruits are especially rare and wonderful. The distinctions of foods in these examples show that not only was there a social class system in place for the Kievan Rus’, but that it was visible in one’s food, and these same class expectations for behavior would become even more entrenched as the Middle Ages continued.

In addition to a more general power or social and economic status, food can also be used to indicate godliness. Fasting in the *Chronicle* is almost entirely the purview of the clergy, mainly appearing in this work in examples from the lives of noteworthy monks of the Kiev Cave Monastery, where Nestor, who compiled the *Chronicle*, lived and worked²¹. Theodosius, Prior of the Crypt Monastery, instructs his brothers on the importance of fasting, saying:

demons incite in monks evil thoughts and desires, and inflame their fancy so that their prayers are impaired. One must combat such thoughts when they come by using the sign of the Cross and by saying, “Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us, Amen!” With this end in view, we must practice abstinence from many foods, for evil desires develop out of excessive eating and immoderate drinking, and by the growth of such thoughts sin is caused²².

Setting this example, Theodosius then takes with him “but a few loaves of bread”, spending the remainder of Lent locked in a crypt in solitude and prayer²³. The effects of these evil desires are then demonstrated by the plight of Issac, who languished in the grip of evil for years:

It is wondrous and strange that he lay thus for two years, tasting neither bread nor water nor any other food nor fruit, nor did he speak with his tongue, but lay deaf and dumb for the whole two years. . . . They set bread before him, but he would not take it unless they placed it in his hand. Theodosius then said, “Leave the bread before him, but do not put it in his hand, so that he can eat of his own volition”. For a week he ate nothing, but

18 Bridget Ann Henisch, *The Medieval Cook* (Suffolk, 2009), 35.

19 *Ibid.*, 121, 143, 157.

20 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 86.

21 Horace G. Lunt, “Food in the Russian Primary Chronicle”, 21.

22 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 156.

23 *Ibid.*, 157.

gradually he became aware of the bread and tasted it. Thus he began to eat, and by this means Theodosius freed him from the craft of the devil²⁴.

Interestingly, the text implies that the breaking of the fast at the end of the account is part of what “freed him from the craft of the devil,” indicating that it is not only the absence of food, but consumption which also offers redemption. Caroline Walker Bynum explains, “When we look at what medieval people themselves wrote, we find that they often spoke of gluttony as the major form of lust, of fasting as the most painful renunciation, and of eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God”²⁵. After all, sin entered the world when Eve ate of the apple, yet salvation also comes by eating and drinking, as in the Eucharist. A lack of eating, while not literal fasting, is also used to convey piety on Olga at her death. The text notes, “Olga had given command not to hold a funeral feast for her, for she had a priest who performed the last rites over the sainted Princess”²⁶. In place of the traditional — and potentially gluttonous — feast, the princess was content with spiritual guidance at her deathbed.

Finally, food, or lack thereof, can also indicate ungodliness or Otherness. Several mentions of so-called barbarian tribes in the *Chronicle* show the uncivilized nature of outsiders: The Derevlians, so thoroughly routed by Olga’s cleverness, “existed in bestial fashion, and lived like cattle. They killed one another, ate every impure thing, and there was no marriage among them, but instead they seized upon maidens by capture. The Radimichians, the Vyatichians, and the Severians had the same customs. They lived in the forest like any wild beast, and ate every unclean thing”²⁷. Another barbarian tribe located in the mountains had been driven there by Alexander the Great at God’s command: “They ate every nauseous thing, such as gnats, flies, cats, and serpents. They did not bury their dead, but ate them, along with the fruit of abortions and all sorts of impure beasts. On beholding this, Alexander was afraid lest, as they multiplied, they might corrupt the earth”²⁸. This method of identifying the brutal Other based on eating preferences is extremely old, dating back to Antiquity. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, written in 8th century Greece, the Cyclops is described as “a savage, ignorant of rights and laws”²⁹, identified chiefly by the abundant dairy products found in his cave. The Cyclops, too, reveals his true nature when attacks the hero Odysseus and his men, filling “his monstrous maw by eating human flesh and pouring down pure milk”³⁰. Cannibalism and dairy-drinking were both looked

24 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 162.

25 Caroline Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,” *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York, 2013), 245.

26 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 86.

27 *Ibid.*, 56.

28 *Ibid.*, 185.

29 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. George Herbert Palmer (Mineola, N.Y., 1999), 84.

30 *Ibid.*, 85.

down upon in the Mediterranean culture, which preferred more civilized drink such as wine. Food historian Massimo Montanari explains,

Expressions such as these, which we find in authors of the late antiquity and early Middle Ages, reveal a view of barbarism as a primordial state of humanity as yet incapable of controlling its own destiny, of “artificially” fabricating its own food (bread) or its own beverage (wine), a humanity dependent on nature and on the products nature “naturally” provides for humanity³¹.

Being unable to grow food through agrarian methods, forced to subsist only on what could be hunted or gathered, seemed disgusting indeed, even to the Rus’ of the *Chronicle*.

On the other hand, being able to produce food from nothing was even more dangerous; this was the mark of magic users and evildoers. In one example, the Suzdal people were beset by magicians who murdered and promised to spoil the harvest, causing “great confusion and famine throughout all that country”³². However, quick action from the townspeople led to the punishment of the magicians, and grain was purchased from the Bulgars to survive through the season. In another example, evil magicians took advantage of an existing famine in Rostov to murder and steal: “two magicians appeared from Yaroslavl’ and said they knew who interfered with the food supply ... The inhabitants brought into their presence their sisters, their mothers, and their wives, and the magicians in their delusion stabbed them in the back and drew out from their bodies grain or fish”³³. Though the process was long and more perilous, eventually these devil worshippers were punished, too.

In general, “bad luck” of this nature, with barbarous outsiders or devil worshippers, were thought to be God’s punishment on the people. Likewise, famine, was an indicator of the Lord’s displeasure. The entry for 1068 states unequivocally,

God in his wrath causes foreigners to attack a nation, and then, when its inhabitants are thus crushed by the invaders, they remember God. Intestine strife is incited by the craft of the devil. For God wishes men not evil but good; while the devil takes his delight in cruel murder and bloodshed, and therefore incites quarrels, envy, domestic strife, and slander. When any nation has sinned, God punishes them by death or famine³⁴.

Indeed, a Biblical plague appears in the entry for 1094: “On August 26 of the same year, a plague of locusts attacked Rus’, and ate up all the grass and much grain. Such a visitation was unheard of in the early days of Rus’, but in consequence

31 Massimo Montanari, *Cheese, Pears, and History*, trans. Beth Archer Brombert (New York, 2008), 13–14.

32 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 134–135.

33 *Ibid.*, 150–151.

34 *Ibid.*, 146.

of our sins, our eyes beheld it"³⁵. In these perilous medieval times, food might be withheld or provided by the devil or by God; your food could mark you as pious or piteous, as prince or priest or peasant.

With this work, I have examined the relationship between the culture of the Rus' people and depictions of food as they appear in the twelfth-century record of Rus' earliest history, known as the *Primary Chronicle*. Portrayals of food here are represented in line with the Christian beliefs of the chronicler and the Rus' people, as well as the emerging feudalism of medieval Russia. The author also displays typical biases of civilized versus uncivilized food culture, a motif which has existed since Antiquity. In the *Primary Chronicle*, food is generally used to show prestige or power, which may be wielded by anyone, social status, in the abundance of the wealthy, and the godliness of fasting clergy, as well as the unclean eating habits of heathen outsiders. In addition to Horace G. Lunt's linguistic analysis of food in the *Chronicle*, this work could be expanded to incorporate other examples of themes and patterns in Rus' culture which are not possible to discuss here due to the short length of this piece. For example, Prince Svyatoslav is described as a great military leader, and "[u]pon his expeditions he carried with him neither wagons nor kettles, and boiled no meat, but cut off small strips of horseflesh, game, or beef, and ate it after roasting it on the coals. Nor did he have a tent, but he spread out a horse-blanket under him, and set his saddle under his head; and all his retinue did likewise"³⁶. This passage, which is unique in its detail, seems to serve a specific purpose and could be used to examine military customs and food for the Rus' or portrayals of masculinity and food. Much can still be researched in regards to food culture and the Rus'. The more we study, the more we hunger to know about the Rus'.

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35 *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, 180.

36 *Ibid.*, 84.