

**On the Peripheries of the Reformation:  
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Abstract:

We often think of the early English Reformation (c.1530-1650) as a time when fish consumption in England declined, due to Reformers' scepticism of regularized fasting and other good works. Evidence gathered from household diet accounts paints a somewhat different story, especially when examined over the *longue durée*. A selection of diet accounts from four medieval English households, and five post-Reformation English noble households, reveals a somewhat different story regarding habits and approaches to fasting between the pre- and post-Reformation periods. During the medieval period, abstinence from meat, a general decrease in the luxuriant nature of food, and small varieties of ingredients marked the daily fast-day entries in the accounts. The post-Reformation accounts (1530-1660) reveal continuation of fasting after the Reformation – though significantly different in nature – and a great increase in the variety of fish served at typical fast meals. Additionally, evidence exists supporting both continuing proclamations to enforce regular fasting during the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles II, including records of incarceration for offenders under Charles II.

Text:

Good Afternoon. Food and eating have recently attracted a great deal of attention in many fields. In history, I'm sure, we have all seen food used as an investigatory tool to assess a vast array of cultural, technological, and even economic questions.

Food habits can be an excellent way to tap into these problems in order to see individuals responding to societal shifts within their own domestic lives. And while we have gained a degree of cultural insight through food, the topic of dietary regimes and the Reformation have sometimes been taken for granted, save for a fact that most religious, food, and economic historians agree on: fish consumption seems to have declined in the wake of the Reformation.

While evidence indicates this to be the case, the general decline in fish consumption is only one aspect of the story. There is another aspect to this story that is mostly unknown, and that is: in many ways the habit of religious fasting took on new significance – and one might even argue, prominence – during the post-

Reformation period. This is not to say that regularity of fasting increased, but rather, that the entire topic of fasting took on new dimensions during the post-Reformation period, some parameters of which I will set out now.

While completing my dissertation, and since then, I have been working on compiling a data bank of household diet accounts and food inventories. Diet accounts are specialized domestic accountancy books that list only expenses related to the kitchen and provisioning of food, and costs of associated services. Diet accounts often vary in terms of composition, notarial conventions, and types of information included, but they typically include:

- the date
- a list of ingredients served on a particular day
- the location of the household
- the amount of ingredients served, either by weight or item count
- the cost of individual ingredients
- and sometimes, notes about suppliers, or what divisions of the kitchen received what types of food

Most of the accounts that I included in this analysis are held in the National Archives in Richmond, Lambeth Palace Archives, and in the Devonshire Collection at Chatsworth House.

I have assembled a data bank that currently includes more than 2000 daily entries, with more than 40,000 individual ingredients recorded by date and household, approximately 660 days of which fall into the period after the Reformation. I would like to focus on a selection of nine English households from my database, and their fish-consumption patterns.

Four of the households fall into the pre-Reformation period, while five fall into the post-Reformation period. Four households were nominally Catholic households, while the five post-Reformation households were all nominally Protestant. All of these households were either royal or from the noble levels of society, and each maintained a large or “great” household with dozens of servants. Unfortunately, smaller households did not often maintain kitchen account books, so my comments here are mostly limited to elite levels of society.

The four accounts in the medieval group of households included:

- Eleanor of Brittany, living at Bristol Castle, from 1225-1226
  - Katherine de Norwich, living in Suffolk and Norfolk in 1336-1337
  - Alice de Bryene, living in Suffolk, 1412-1413
- and
- William de Mountford, living in Warwickshire in 1433-1434

The five post-Reformation households were:

- The diet accounts of Henry VIII's Council, at Westminster, for the years of 1541-1542
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Cumberland's accounts, for 1575-1577, in the Midlands
- The 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Middlesex for 1622-1623, in London
- The 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Cumberland for 1623, in the Midlands
- and
- The royal household's diet accounts for 1663, under Charles II at Whitehall

This is a wide range of dates, but they allow us to sample the dietary habits of the aristocracy at key periods, especially in light of the English Reformation.

In the medieval group we see a pattern of fish consumption that was almost universal. All of the medieval households fasted three days per week – all year.

Each Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, as well as throughout the forty days of Lent, and on the eve of most major feasts, only fish, olive oil, vegetables, and eggs were recorded as arriving into the kitchen.

Some local variation occurred, as well as individual variation from household to household, and certainly the species of fish listed varied, but overall this neat, three fast-day per week pattern emerged. Occasionally, if major feasts occurred on a Friday – Christmas for example – the fast was not observed but rather a typical feast-day selection of ingredients would appear with meat. Otherwise, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturdays were fast days.

For example, on a typical fast day in the Bristol Castle kitchens, Saturday June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1225, the cooks of Elanore of Brittany received conger eel, eggs, flour. On the following Friday, June 12<sup>th</sup>, the kitchen received salmon and turbot. For fast days in ordinary time, these are normal orders in terms of composition and variety of fish, although during times like Lent, the household relied much more on dried fish or stockfish.

In the household of Katherine de Norwich, located at the time in Suffolk, a typical fast-day selection of ingredients looked much the same as those Elanore of Brittany's household. On Friday October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1336, Katherine's cooks received cod, whiting, and herring. Later in the year, on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1336, the Feast of All Souls, the kitchen received cod, herring, and haddock. Typically, in the de Norwich household, 2-3 varieties of fish were served on typical fast days.

Nearly a century later, we can see a similar collection of fast-day ingredients entered the kitchen of Alice de Bryene. At her house in Suffolk, on Wednesday March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1413, the cooks received 60 red herrings, one half of a salt salmon, and one stockfish. Earlier in the year, on the feast of the Epiphany, which happened on a

Friday that year, the kitchen received half of a salt salmon and one stockfish. Like the de Norwich household, the de Bryene household normally only served 2-3 varieties of fish on most fast days, and maintained the three-day-per-week fasting pattern.

Only a few decades later, the diet account of William de Mountford's household, located in Warwickshire, received similar selections of ingredients. On Friday March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1434, the kitchen received oysters and smelt. On Saturday June 12, 1434, the kitchen received two salmon and no other fish. Although the de Mountford household was large and prestigious, and wealthier than the de Norwich and de Bryene households, the Mountford household maintained quite an austere fast when it was occurring, serving only 1-2 varieties of fish on most fast days.

Now, I could continue listing dates and ingredients received on those dates, but for the medieval period, we would basically see the same pattern that I have outlined here: 2-3 varieties of fish were served on fast days which occurred each Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.

Each of the households here maintained fairly austere menus on fast days. Although they could access many different types of fish, and did so on major feast days, the average fast day was marked by restrained variety in food and menus. The fast was meant to encourage – or at least display – humility.

When we move into the early portion of the period after the English Reformation, a very different picture emerges in the five post-Reformation households.

For one, the old pattern of Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday fast days was absent, and the varieties of species included in the account expanded

At the palace of Westminster, for meeting days of Henry VIII's Council in 1541-1542, only the Friday fast was maintained, and it was maintained 100% of the time. Wednesdays and Saturdays were no longer fast days, unless the King decided to fast. Deciding to fast could occur on any day of the week, though there was not a fixed pattern as there was during previous centuries. So the fast didn't go away, in England, at least right away. In terms of the varieties of fish served to the Council on fast days, there was a great deal of variety: on Tuesday October 18, 1541, the kitchen received: herring, pike, salt salmon, flounder, eel, whiting, and ling. On Thursday November 17<sup>th</sup>, the Council again observed a fast day, and this time included herring, pike, salt salmon, flounder, greenfish, eel, whiting and ling.

If we move out of the royal context, back into the noble context, we see something slightly different: a trend of marking fast days with a great variety of fish, and also of confining fasts to specific meals as opposed to entire days.

For example, in the household of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Cumberland, located in the Midlands, during 1575-1576, the old Wednesday and Friday fasts were maintained, but the

Saturday fast was not. The Lenten fast was maintained for the full 40 days. On fast days, the Earl's household would typically receive orders like that on Friday January 20<sup>th</sup>: cod, stockfish, haddock, salmon, trout, and cockle. On Friday, April 13, 1576, the kitchen received eggs, stockfish, herring, sprat, cockle, pike, salmon, and eel. Certainly this was an increase over the varieties of fish present in the medieval households that I outlined earlier, but if we examine more households, we see a similar increase in varieties of fish served on fast days.

In the household of the fourth Earl of Cumberland, between 1622-1623, the weekly Friday fast that had occurred in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl's household, was dropped. Occasional fast days occurred, like the austere Good Friday fasts (April 20, 1623), when the Earl's kitchen received only cod and eggs all day, but fast days seem to have turned into fast meals where fasting only occurred for a meal instead of an entire day. For example, on Friday December 22, 1622, the kitchen used cod, salmon, stockfish, trout, and ling at lunch – with no quadruped meat - but had mutton, beef, and pork at dinner time, with no fish. On Tuesday March 27<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the household maintained a fast, again only at lunch time, using cod, salmon, cockle, trout, pike, and eel, while at dinner pork and poultry formed the menu. So whereas in the 3<sup>rd</sup> earl's household, the fast was maintained all day, each Friday and throughout Lent, by the seventeenth century, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl's household dropped the weekly Friday fast and confined fasting to specific meals but not normally to the entire day.

A similar pattern existed in the household of the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Middlesex's London household in 1623. In this case, beef and a large ham was received in the kitchen on Tuesday March 7<sup>th</sup>, for dinner, but the kitchen also received cod, whiting, carp, herring, roach, plaice, mussels, crab, lobster, cockle, and pickled oysters, served at lunch time. On Friday February 22, although mutton, bacon, and pork were served at dinner time, lunch included carp, whiting, lobster, oyster, salmon, flounder.

Similarly, in the royal household, under Charles II, fasts were confined to individual meals. In 1661, dinners were typically meat-based while lunches – if there was a fast that day – were fast meals. So on Friday May 31, at Whitehall, dinner consisted of beef, pork, mutton, capons, hens, and mallard. Lunch that day, however, was a fast, and consisted of cod, carp, stockfish, whiting, herring, mackerel, pike, trout, plaice, lobster, salmon, flounder, skate, and sole.

In each of the accounts that I have mentioned here, I have outlined average fast day menus, whether they occurred on feast days or on ordinary days. At least until the 1660s, the fast was still continuing, even if its form was changing.

During the early period directly after the English Reformation, Henry's Council maintained a fast every Friday, all day, and maintained fast days, all day, sporadically but frequently on other days.

The closely contemporaneous household of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Cumberland maintained the weekly Wednesday and Friday fasts, and the Lenten fast, but dropped the Saturday fast.

Later, in the 1570s and 1620s the households of the third and fourth Earls of Cumberland, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Middlesex, no weekly fasts occurred, but fasting did occur all day on Good Friday, and only at individual meals on other, sporadic days.

Interestingly, the varieties of fish included in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts expanded dramatically over the medieval accounts. Here I have listed every species of fish that appeared in each account. This does not show how much was served, or how often, it only shows what varieties of fish and seafood households accessed. Although the medieval households that I mentioned earlier could obtain many different types of fish, they typically only included 2-3 different types on fast days.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth-century group, the varieties of fish included on fast-day menus expanded dramatically over the medieval or even early Tudor precedent. The fast itself modified in terms of its position in the week and whether it was maintained all day or not.

In fact, if we look at the lists side by side, we can see that slightly more species of fish were included in the post-Reformation accounts, and also that the average great household accessed more types of fish than did the medieval households.

So, the fast did not go away with the onset of the English Reformation. It certainly changed a great deal, but ironically, it seems that the early English Protestants included more types of fish in their fasting menus than did their medieval counterparts. It seems that the medieval fast was a time for modesty, even in the households of the elite, while in the post-Reformation great household context, fast meals were an opportunity to display the bounty of the sea. At a time when we often think that fish and fasting were decreasing in prominence, the diet accounts reveal that the early Protestants were struggling religiously and domestically with the question about what to do with fish days under the new system which decried many of the old good works.

Most reformers had no problem with idea of fasting, but they did have problems with fasting because it was a certain day of the week. Even Zwingli didn't discourage fasting, but rather he decried regularized, habitual fasting. During his sermon on Sunday April 23, 1522, he noted that "all of my efforts are directed against this assumption that we are restrained at this and that time by divine law. Let each one

fast as often as the spirit of true belief urges him.”<sup>1</sup> So fasting itself was not a problem, even with some of the more radical reformers, but fasting because it was a certain day of the week was a problem.

What of the rest of society? It seems that the non-elite embraced the shift away from fasting, quite early. So much so that Lord Burghley helped to implement “Political Lent” or government-mandated fasting. The origins of Burghley’s legislation lay in his *Considerations delivered to the Parliament, 1559*. Twenty-fifth in the *Considerations* can be found an explanation of the necessity for mandating a “political Lent,” noting that “the old course of fishing [should] be maintained by the straitest observation of fish days, for policy sake; so the sea coasts shall be strong with men and habitations and the fleet flourish more than ever.”<sup>2</sup> The consideration was later proclaimed and made law by Elizabeth I in 1559. A large-scale turn away from fasting, to Burghley at least, threatened the economic livelihoods of costal towns and – of course – the navy. Whether the turn away from regularized fasting was, actually, affecting the naval and costal economies is unknown, but it seems that this fear existed for some time after the Tudor period.

Examination of the Tudor and Stuart *State Papers Domestic* reveals that legislative attempts to enforce fish days did, indeed, continue after Elizabeth’s 1559 proclamation. James I made a similar proclamation in 1606, while Charles I did the same in September, 1630.<sup>3</sup> James’s proclamations seem to have attracted little attention, but Charles’ proclamation was followed up with force. In 1630, forty-two London victuallers, “chiefly cooks and innholders,” whose charge was “breach of the King’s late proclamation for abstinence from flesh, and against dressing any meat in victualing houses on fish days.”<sup>4</sup>

The fast and its relationship to early Protestant domestic habits is complex and interesting. In one sense, it offers a revealing perspective into the religious, political, and economic forces at work in the kitchens of the early English Protestant elite. But it also offers an idea of gradual adoption of reformed dietary modes; modes that today we sometimes think of as part-and-parcel of the Reformation. In fact, at least for the households included in this analysis, fasting seems to have required careful consideration from contemporaries. Whereas medieval fast days were times of abstinence and good works, fasting in the early Protestant households gradually turned into a celebration of the bounty of the sea, and possibly a moral

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, “Von Erkiesen und Fryheit der Spysen” or “Regarding the Choice and Freedom of Foods,” in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli: Together with Selections from His German Works, Volume 1*, ed. & trans. Samuel Macauley Jackson (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1912) 70–112, quote taken from p 80.

<sup>2</sup> Anon., “1559,” *Calendar of the Cecil Papers*, 150–165.

<sup>3</sup> Anon., “James I: September, 1606,” in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: James I, 1603–1610* (London: unknown, 1857) 318; Anon. *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles I: 1629–1631*, ed. John Bruce (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860) 348.

<sup>4</sup> Anon., “James I: December, 1606,” *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Charles I: 1629–1631*, 397.

duty of good English subjects who wished to preserve the structure of the economy. Fasting, until well into the seventeenth century, became both a religious and a political consideration for monarchs, even if some reformers decried structured patterns of fast days.

Thank you.