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Medieval Histories

Offa's Dyke
Das Grote Mandrenke
All Saints and All Souls

Medieval Histories

News from the medieval world about
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Offa's Dyke

- *The early medieval earthwork, Offa's Dyke, has entered the Lonely Planet list of the world's "Must-See" 2013. But when was it built, by whom and for which reason? New research sheds information of the enigmatic monument at the border between Wales and England, while offering a new interpretation.*

Grote Mandrenke

- *At the start of the little Ice Age, the North sea was hit by a series of storm tides. One of the most infamous was "Das Grote Mandrenke" in 1362 – the great drowner of men. However, not only the changing weather conditions caused the high floods post 1300. Changing patterns of exploitation of the marshy regions along the coastline from Denmark to Holland caused the catastrophies. Worth rembering this week where the East Coast of USA was hit by "the largest storm ever".*

Alls Saints and All Souls

- *Nowadays the two feasts have collapsed into one, but in the Middle Ages they were kept strictly apart.*

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Offa's Dyke © Graham Watts

Offa's Dyke

The early medieval earthwork, Offa's Dyke recently entered the Lonely Planet list of the world's "Must-See" 2013 ...

Are you a keen walker on the lookout for new trails to wander along? If so, Offa's Dyke should – at least according to Lonely Planet - top your plans for your next adventure 2013.

The Monument

Offa's Dyke is a massive linear earthwork consisting of a ditch and a bank. The earthwork – including ditch - is up to 18 meters wide with a bank up to 3.65 metres high on the Welsh side (1.83 metres on the English side). The exact dimension is however not known, as the Dyke – as it stands today has been heavily eroded in most places. Since large parts of it has virtually disappeared the exact extension is a contested issue as is also the date as well as function of the construction.

A historiographic overview

Anyone, who is interested in the history of the Dyke, may get a recent historiographical overview in an article published by **Damian Tyler**. In the article he gives an overview of the three main studies of the Dyke – the study by Fox in the middle of the 20th century,

the unpublished work by Frank Noble and finally the recent work by the late David Hill and his wife Margaret Worthington, which was carried out as part of the ODP, the Offa's Dyke project. The ODP was a voluntary organization connected with the University of Manchester. In 2003 they published what is still the best introduction to the history of the Dyke and the extensive archaeological and historical survey of the monument, they carried out.

The effort

So much is agreed upon: Offa's Dyke is a fairly uniform construction, comprising "a shallow, V-shaped ditch on the Welsh side and a corresponding bank on the English side" (Tyler p. 149). The

mound situated on the east side was construed out of the earth dug out from the ditch. It was typically dug on the Western side of a hilly slope. This might have exposed the earthwork to erosion from water draining from the hil-tops. There are no definitive traces of any woodwork or stone-palisades on the top of the bank. Neither can it be excluded. Nor have any gaps or openings been found.

The size

A question of contention is how far it reached. Fox in the mid 20th century believed that it reached from the banks of the Severn estuary and all the way up to Prestatyn by the Irish Sea. The later work by Hill and Worthington argues for a more minimal stretch: Only

Offa's dyke in the summer © Best in Wales





The path winds it's way - © Rambling Pete

the 102 km from Rushock Hill to Treuddyn belongs to what is called Offa's Dyke.

If we accept the minimalist model, the number of work-hours invested in the project can be calculated. According to Tyler the amount of earth, which had to be moved, was 575.000 m³. With a more correct estimate of 707.707 m³ corresponding to the equivalent of 707.707 – 833.000 days of work, it would take app. 6-7000 men working during a summer (four months); a heavy conscription of workers, but no more than a small army. With more men – Tyler makes a calculation with 10.000 – the earthwork might according to him have been completed in 10 weeks time. (Probably closer to 3 months). All a bit speculative as we do not know how large a workforce could be conscripted at this time.

The date

Archaeologically very little may

be deduced about the exact date, when the dyke was constructed. As a matter of fact it may have been built at any time between c. 200 and 1100.

Asser, however, in his biography of Alfred wrote around 893 that “There was in Mercia in fairly recent times a certain vigorous king called Offa, who terrified all the neighboring kings and provinces around him and who had a great dyke built between Wales and Mercia from sea to sea.” As Asser wrote a century after the reign of Offa it is not unlikely that a myth about the width and length of the Dyke may have been widespread at the time of Asser, whatever its real length.

However the question of whether it was a myth too, that Offa was to be held accountable, is unanswerable as long as archaeology yields nothing but silence. Tyler concludes that while it might seem that the “reign of King Offa”

is the most likely period for the construction of the dyke, this attribution is rather less secure than generally imagined” (p154).

Arguments for placing the construction of the dyke in his reign, centers on the fact that Offa (757 – 796) in all matters expressed clear imperial designs. He is best known for his extensive minting as well as his diplomatic relations and his correspondence with Charlemagne. Not least Offa's quarrel with him about the marriage of their respective sons and daughters is remarkable.

The Function

Concerning the question of functionality, Tyler tries to break new ground. Earlier on it was believed that the dyke was a military installation meant to defend the English from military war-bands of the Britons and their cattle-raids. Although very few entrance points have been discovered, it was never complicated to mount the dyke on

foot. By horse, however, it must have been very difficult. Getting cattle back from the English side even more complicated. However, as the dyke was left to erode after only 20 years it has been argued that it cannot have been erected to deter occasional war-bands (which continued back on forth in the centuries thereafter). Another explanation might be that it was built at a specific time to deter a large Welsh army on the march or to defend the back of Mercia against invading Welsh troops, while the army of Offa was elsewhere engaged fighting Wessex. On the other hand no evidence has been found for associated watchtowers, forts or garrisons.

Tyler, though, argues that the dyke was primarily a piece of monumental architecture designed to impress the Welsh (and maybe the Mercians). Although it cannot be proven without doubt that the works of Gilda and Bede were known in Mercia at that time, it is highly likely. Both were known to tell the story of the impressive earthworks of the Romans. The dyke might have been mimicry of Hadrian's Wall, meant to spread the tale of the mighty Offa and his

achievements while at the same time supplanting the heathen mounds which formerly played that role for his forebears.

Which he succeeded in, viz. the testimonial of Asser!

The Trail

Today Offa's dyke is more than anything a symbol of the fact that Wales is a separate nation - part of UK and yet with a National Assembly of its own, a democratically elected body that represents the interests of Wales and its people, makes laws for Wales and holds the Welsh Government to account.

However, Offa's Dyke is also a National Trail, which runs 285 km along the spectacular border between England and Wales. Offa's Dyke Path was opened in the summer of 1971, linking Sedbury Cliffs near Chepstow on the banks of the Severn estuary with the coastal town of Prestatyn on the shores of the Irish Sea. Thus it encompasses much more than what is currently believed to be the run of the Dyke. The Trail explores the whole of the Marches (the border-land). It passes

Offa's Dyke on a misty morning © Mark S. Weiner www.worldsoflaw.com



READ MORE:

Offa's Dyke: A Historiographical Appraisal.

By Damien Tyler
In: Early medieval Europe, Vol 37, issue 2 , 2011, p. 145 – 161.

Offa's Dyke: History and Guide

By David Hill and Margaret Worthington.
Tempus Publishing, Stroud 2003/2009

Offa's Dyke: Landscape and Hegemony in Eighth Century Britain

By Ian Bapty and Keith Ray.
Oxbow 2012 (in press)

The Age of Offa and Alcuin

By Patrick Wormald
In: The Anglo-Saxons. Ed. By James Campbell
Penguin 1991

Aethelbald and Offa: two eighth-century kings of Mercia.

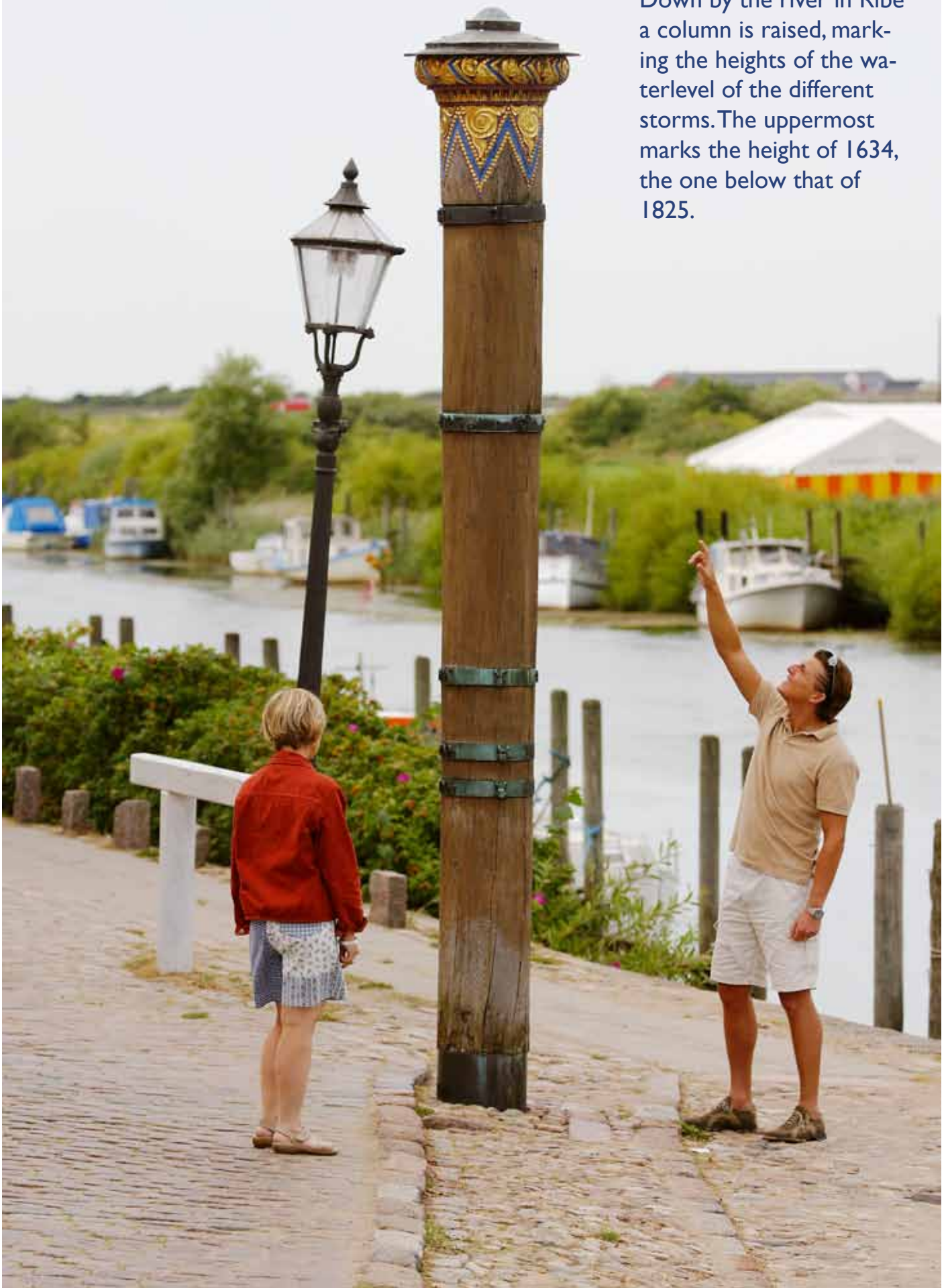
By David Hill and Margaret Worthington. (Ed)
Archaeopress 2005

through the Brecon Beacons National Park on the spectacular Hatterall Ridge. In addition it links no less than three areas of outstanding natural beauty – the Wye Valley, the Shropshire Hills and the Clwydian Hills.

It typically takes about a fortnight to complete the whole trail. There are regular places to stay, eat, and drink in the vicinity of the Trail and public transport is available at key points. For details see www.nationaltrail.co.uk

The High Flood Column

Down by the river in Ribe a column is raised, marking the heights of the waterlevel of the different storms. The uppermost marks the height of 1634, the one below that of 1825.



Grote Mandrenke

At the start of the little Ice Age, the North sea was hit by a series of storm tides. One of the most infamous was “Das Grote Mandrenke” in 1362 – the great drowner of men. However, not only the changing weather conditions caused the high floods post 1300. Changing patterns of exploitation of the marshy regions along the coastline from Denmark to Holland caused the catastrophies.

It began on the 15th of January 1362 but reached its high point on the 16th. This flood caused the destruction of a series of outlying promonteries on the Western Coast of Jutland and Friesland all the way down to Holland.

Rungholt

One victim was the city of Rungholt, which until the beginning of the 20th century used to yield medieval artifacts and debris into the nets of fishermen. During the storm it sank beneath the waves,

while the isle of Strand was created.

Surveys conducted in the 20s and 30s, when remains of the city were suddenly exposed, suggest a large population of about 1500 – 2000 persons. It is likely that Rungholt was a major port shipping cattle to the markets in Holland and Flandern. There are no contemporary descriptions of Das Grote Mandrenke and later estimates of the number of deaths were probably highly exaggerated. However,

there is no doubt that its memory lingered for a long time. Local myth still has it than whenever a storm brews in the Wadden Sea and the region is threatened with a flood, people sailing through might still hear the bells ringing.

All Saints

Thus in 1436 the first flood of “All Saints” hit the coast, which caused the Cathedral of Schleswig to apply for help in Basel, which at that time housed the Concilium Basiliense. The argument was that

Map of Southern Jutland and Schleswig by Johannes Meier 1650 - showing the land before and after the great storm of 1634 Source: Wikipedia





The mark on the wall of Ribe Cathedral

60 parishes had been lost to the sea. Yet again in 1532 the second “Storm of All Saints” hit with a vengeance. Several thousand people perished. In Tønder, where water stood 5,3 meters above the mean sea level, it reached 1,8 meter up from the floor in the aisle of the church of St. Laurentius. In Ribe it was possible to catch fish in the cloister of the cathedral.

According to the mark in the Cathedral of Ribe, the worst was still to come. In December 1634 the sea reached 5.5 meters above the usual and water stood 1,6 meters above the floor in the Cathedral (as witnessed by a mark cut into the wall of the church.)

A chronicler, Peter Sax, wrote that “at seven o’clock the Lord turned the wind into South West and let it storm so fiercely, that no human being could walk nor stand. Between 8 and 9 all dykes were broken and eroded. The air was full of fire, the heaven burned and the Lord let all thunder, hailstorms and lightning loose while the wind blew with such a strength that the earth moved.”

At this storm the island of Strand was once more broken into fragments out of which were created the islets of Pellworm, Nordstrand and Nordstrandischmoor. 2/3 of the population on Strand died during that storm.

Houses on warfts

Early on people tried to defend themselves against the tidal storms by building their farms or villages on warfts or highly silted banks – artificial mounds. The salt marshes of Ditmarschen were already settled during 1st century AD. Archaeological excavations have pointed out the existence of such warfts with longhouses bordering a channel at Süderbusenwurdh. Larger warfts existed along the estuary of the River Eider. The economy of these settlements was based on husbandry with cattle grazing on the salt marshes. Only small-scale farming has been demonstrated with plants like horse beans, barley, oats, emmer and flax. The crops were grown in garden-plots on higher banks during summer.

Sheep taking to the high ground © Mathias-Königschulte



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Archäologie, Geschichte.***

By Dirk Meier
Boyens Verlag 2011

***Dike Building, Storm
Surges and Land Losses
at the North-Sea coast of
Schleswig-Holstein, Ger-
many***

By Dirk Meier

www.kuestenarchaeologie.de

- For anyone reading German this is a treasure throve of articles and papers about the early medieval life-world in the Wadden Sea.

At some point between 400-600 these settlements were left; probably the inhabitants took part in the Englo-Saxon migration to England in this period. Later the area was once more inhabited.

The best example of an early medieval warft is at Wellinghusen near Wöhrden. Here a settlement was established at the end of the 7th century AD. Later at the beginning of the 9th century new housing was erected on separate mounds. Later a larger village mound was developed; this was continuously raised until the 14th century AD.

Nowadays the inhabitants on a number of small islands in the North Sea, the Halligen, still depend on such warfts to carry them through stormy weather. Here the traditional way of life may be still be experienced.

Dikes and drainage

In the 11th century the building of dikes and the drainage of land began. Initially the dikes were built around the arable fields to keep out the occasional spring or summer floods. (The winter floods were heavier but also left precious silt, which fertilised the fields promising the large yields known from a later period.)



“Landunter” at Hallig Hooge in 1973. Photo was taken by the local pastor on the morning after a major storm and afterwards sold as a postcard in the local church

Later, in the 13th century, some of these ring-dikes were connected and raised by cooperatives, called Geschlechter (literally “kinships”) in Ditmarschen. These dikes were however a blessing in disguise. As the foreland with its tidal flats were reduced, winter flooding became heavier demanding yet higher dykes to be built. At the

same time the peat was systematically cut off and used in salt-production, reducing the natural defence mechanisms of the landscape.

This overexploitation as much as the changing climate caused the terrible storms in The Little Ice Age.

On the dyke in a winter storm © Vadehavscenteret





All Saints and All Souls

In the Middle Ages All Saints and All Souls were kept strictly apart. Later traditions like souling and the distribution of soul-cakes helped to fuse the feasts...

All Saints

The feast for all Saints has very early roots. Very early on after 313 when the church was legalised a common commemoration of the martyrs and saints was instituted. At that time it was celebrated on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Both St. Ephrem (d. 373) and St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) attest to this feast day in their sermons. At that time it seemed appropriate. Many of the early martyrs had died together; further there were

not enough days to go around. Some time in the 8th century the celebration was moved to the autumn. Thus Bede (d. 735) recorded the celebration of all Saints on the 1st of November in England. A hundred years later Pope Gregory IV appointed the this day as All Saints Day and asked Louis the Pious to proclaim this throughout the Carolingian Empire. Not until the beginning of the new millennium the 1st of November was formally established.

All Souls

The feast of All Souls developed alongside All Saints as a day for commemorating all the dead (and not just the saints and martyrs). However, it was not until the abbot Odilio of Cluny in 998 decreed

for all the Cluniac monasteries that special prayers should be offered for all the souls in purgatory, that this feast began to be accepted widely.

Popular Traditions

In the later Middle Ages these two church feasts often mingled to the consternation of theologians. Further they were coupled with more popular beliefs and traditions. All over the Western Church kin groups began to visit graves, place candles or light bonfires as well as (in some parts of Eastern Europe) partake of meals on the graves. To what extent these traditions were ancient and thus reinvented is not known. But they became widely popular. Added to this was

the giving of alms in order to buy indulgence for the deceased.

Medieval Souling

It was believed that for every piece of bread given to the poor a soul could be redeemed from the fire of Hell.

The medieval preacher, John Mirk mentions this tradition of “souling” as old in a sermon from around 1380 - “... wherefore in olden time good men and women would this day buy bread and deal [give] it for the souls that they loved, hoping with each loaf to get a soul out of purgatory”. (*John Mirk’s Festial: edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II. Susan Powell ed, British Library, Early English Text Society, Oxford University Press 2009, p. 270*)

Ringling of Bells

Another tradition was the ringling of bells on the night of All Saints,

which was thought to bring joy to the poor souls in the purgatory. Both traditions were some of the more tenacious after the reformation and lingered on in many places, even while other traditions were abolished and suppressed by Puritans and Calvinists. Lutherans, though, kept the celebration of All Saints (with its church traditions), but tried to abolish the festivities and traditions connected with All Souls. It stands to reason though that the traditions were kept faithfully in the Catholic Church, where belief in the existence of a purgatory is still a part of the official church dogmatics.

Romantic Revival

However, at the beginning of the 19th century the German romantically inspired theologian, Schleiermacher, argued for a Lutheran revival of the feast. The prime mover was the stupendous loss of human life in the Napoleonic

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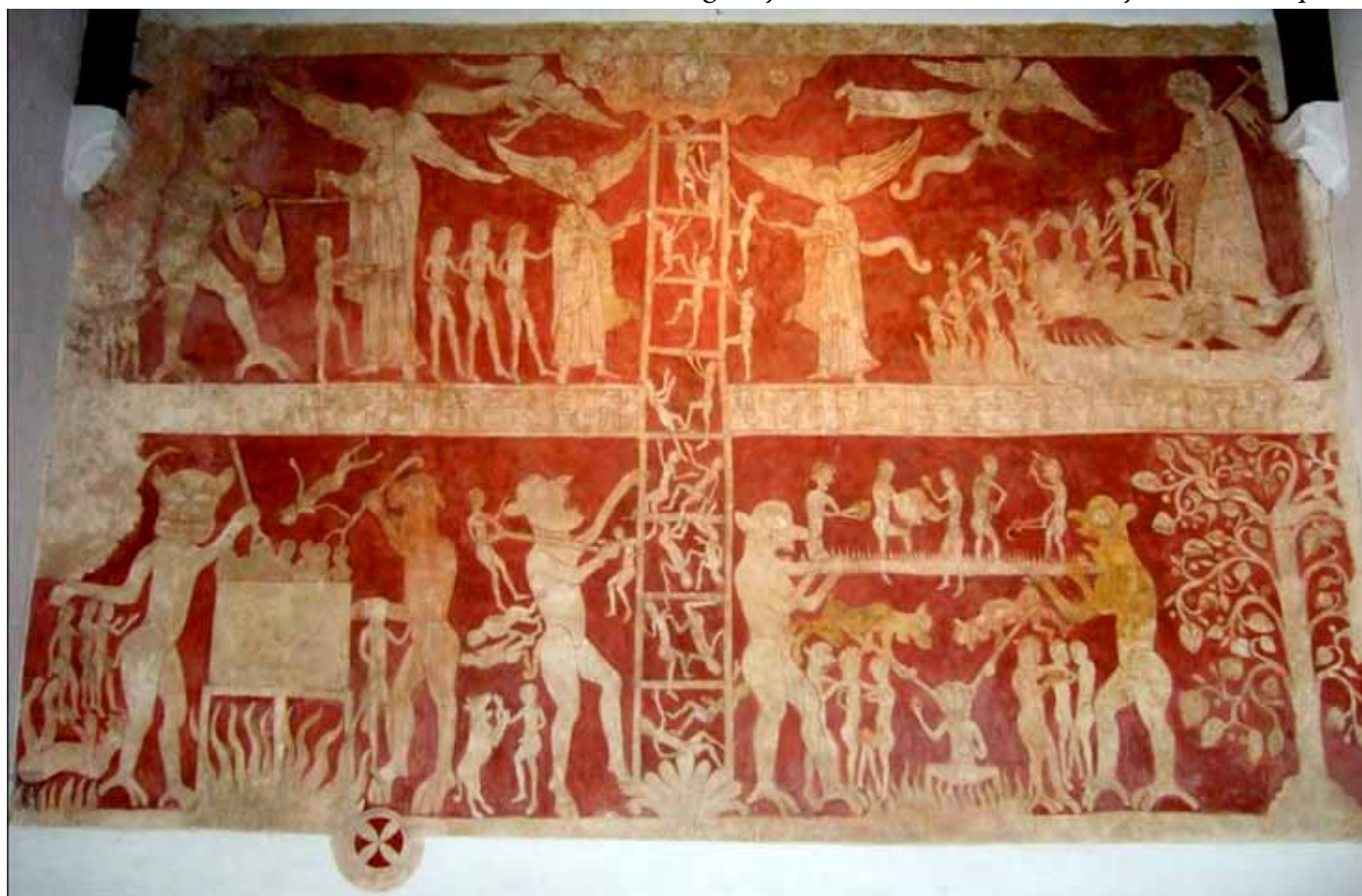
By Ronald Hutton. Oxford University Press 1996

The English Year

By Steve Roud
Penguin Books 2006

Wars. These “new” celebrations were placed at the end of the church calendar on the last Sunday before Advent. One reason was, that the celebration of the 31 October was reserved for the celebration of the reformation, since Luther had advertised his 95 theses exactly on the evening before All Saints in 1517.

Purgatory in Chaldon Church in Surrey Source: Wikipedia





Out of this romantic revival grew the renewed celebration of All Souls. Today it is common in Lutheran Europe to celebrate All Saints with a special service in the evening, where the names of the recently dead are read aloud. Afterwards the congregation walks to the graveyard and lightens candles on the graves.

Soul Cakes

There is no doubt that the tradition of giving alms in the form of bread or cookies on All Saints and All Souls has medieval roots. The question, however, remains, which “cakes” were offered to the hungry children?

One safe bet is that the most common gift was a bun, which might be cut in two, fried in butter on the open hearth and sprinkled with honey or even cinnamon, cardamom or ginger. At home such “French Toasts” - as we call them today - were often served with dried fruits, compotes and sour cream.

Poor Knights

The earliest known reference to

At home cakes have been baked (or bought) for children who are once again walking from door to door begging for alms or “soul-cakes”. This part of the tradition though is decidedly new, inspired by the shops adopting the commercialised Halloween festivities from USA.

French toast is in the Apicius, a collection of Latin recipes dating to the 4th or 5th century; the recipe mentions soaking in milk, but not eggs and gives it no special name, just *Aliter Dulcia* - “another sweet dish”. The recipe goes like this: “Break grated Sigilines (a kind of wheat bread), and make larger bites. Soak in milk, fry in oil, douse in honey and serve.”

Such a concoction can also be found in a 14th-century German recipe under the name “Arme Ritter” (German for “poor knights”). Not very specific, it states that the way to proceed is to “snitten armeritlere vnd backe die in smaltze niht zvo truege “ (Buoch von guter Spysse). Here it is men-

A Soul, A Soul...

Soul, soul, a soul cake!
I pray thee, good missus, a soul cake!
One for Peter, two for Paul,
Three for Him what made us all!
Soul cake, soul cake, please good missus, a soul cake.
An apple, a pear, a plum, or a cherry, any good thing to make us all merry.
One for Peter, two for Paul,
and three for Him who made us all.

The old Soul-ballad is found in many variations (none of which goes back to the Middle Ages.) Corresponding ones may be found in German and other European contexts.

In a modern context the Soul-song is best known from the revival instigated by the American Folk Group Peter, Paul and Mary in 1963.

In 2009, this was once more taken up by the British rock musician Sting's on his album: *If on a Winter's Night...*



tioned as part of a kind of fried omelet (See box)

In the 15th century the dish is mentioned more often. But it is obviously a dish, which was made according to what was in the pantry at any given time – the only two basic ingredients being stale bread and butter or other fat for frying. If available it made sense to soak the bread in milk and dip it in eggs, as well as serve it with anything available from honey, sweet fruity syrups and spices galore. Sometimes it was even made with wine instead of milk and was called “Betrunkene Jungfrau” – “Drunken Virgin”. Another and more refined version was the “Farced Wastells (see recipe in box)

Whatever the actual concoction, this simple dish was known all over Medieval Europe and went under a series of different names: Lost Bread – Arme Ritter – Poor Knight’s of Windsor – Nun’s Toast – Golden Slices of Bread (Pain Perdue – Arme Ritter - Fatias Douradas - Tostees Dorees)...

Twice cooked

Another way of eating stale bread

was to make it even staler – thus cooking it twice – biscocetus, as the bread was called in Medieval Latin. Such biscuits were made out of any dough, which was a leftover from bread-baking. In peasant societies these often ended up as small buns, given to children as delicacies on baking-days. However, after baking they might also be dried out on an oven (or in an open hearth) until they hardened into a type of rusk.

Today we know the word primarily from the name of an Italian delicatessen – Biscotti de Prado. Or we recognise it as the root of biscuits. In Danish, we get closer to the original sense with the rough “Beskøjter”, which was a kind of dried-out bread, kept on ships to feed the sailors. Such bread was formed like small buns out of ordinary rough sourdough. After having been baked, they were dried in the oven before being loaded onboard. Crispy if not mouldy, they were dipped into the usual soup and thus softened up.

However, at some time it was discovered that such “Biscotti” might be improved by being baked out of a dough essentially supple-

mented by eggs, butter (or other shortening) and mixed with dried fruits and nuts. Such cakes might be more or less frugal, the luxurious edition made with a mixture of flour, butter and honey, thus turning it into short-bread; the poor version being more like a old crusty tea-bun.

In England these cookies were called Shortbread, while in Italy they kept their original name: Biscotti. Not until the later Middle Ages sugar was an option, but shortbread might very well be baked with honey as sweetener (see recipe)

Puddings

A final way of getting something for the sweet tooth was to bake a bread out of fine sifted flour and mixing the dough with gracious amounts of milk, cream and/or butter plus eggs. Added to this might be copious amounts of spices and dried fruits. Until baking soda was introduced, cooks of course had to rely on a mixture of sourdough, beer, buttermilk and eggs to get leavened and fluffy dough. According to the character of the mixture it might be either baked as bread, or poured into a bowl and cooked as a pudding. Such bread might of course be baked as what we nowadays call tea-buns – which left to dry, could be halved and fried in butter; and thus end up as “Poor Knights”!

Or the dough could be poured directly into a pan as baked as a “pan-cake”. A thick medieval like pan-cake may (by the way) be made, by substituting fresh milk with half buttermilk and half beer. Let it stand around for a while and it will start to rise. The result will not be as thick as the “Aunt Jemima” variety; but good enough for a medievalist used to crepes.

Livre du roi Modus et de la reine Ratio. 14th century Source: Wikipedia



Recipes



Poor Knights sprinkled with sugar and cardamom

Farced Wastels ca. 1350

Farced Wastells are like rolls stuffed with French toast. Use rolls with a hard crust to help them hold together during boiling and not the bland, frozen variety.

6 large dinner rolls
2 eggs, beaten
4 tbsp. butter, melted
1/4 cup currants (zante)
1 tsp. powder fort – a mixture of e.g. grounded ginger (9), cinnamon (4,5), cloves (1), cubeb (1) grains of paradise (1) and pepper (1). The figures indicates the proportion between the spices.
1/4 tsp. salt
Pinch of saffron

Grind saffron, mix with butter and set aside. Cut centers out of rolls to make a little bowl, reserving removed breadcrumbs. Mix eggs, currants, butter mixture, powder fort, and salt. Pour over breadcrumbs (which preferably has been dried out first) and stir carefully until all bread is evenly coated. Stuff rolls with mixture.

Put about an inch of water in the bottom of a large pan and bring it to boil. Then put in the rolls, reduce heat, and simmer for 15 minutes with the pan tightly covered. Remove immediately from water with a slotted spoon and serve hot.

Source: *Curye on English. Middle English recipes*

Constance B. Hieatt (ed.), Sharon Butler (ed.)
Oxford University Press. Early English Text Society 1985)

Biscotta - or Shortbread with Honey

Rub 225g butter into 425g plain flour. Stir in 100g thick honey. Make dough and knead until firm. Roll out to 5-10mm thick, Cut into shapes, slice or leave whole as you prefer. Bake at 180 degrees C for 10-15 min. until light and golden. Enjoy!

Graciously provided by Catherine Hanley
www.catherinehanley.co.uk

Poor Knights used in an omelette (c. 1350) - A Good Food

One should fry a hen, wrapped in speck. Then cut eight pieces of “Poor Knights” and fry them in fat, but not very dry. The peel and core apples, cut them in pieces and fry the in fat. The make a large omelet of eggs and add spices. Place a layer of apples, afterwards the “poor knights”, then the hen, which is cut into small pieces. Then make a sauce of spices, honey and wine – not to hot – and pour over the omelet, which has been doubled over and has had a window cut in the top. This is called “Hens from Greece” (= Byzantium).

Source: Recipe no. 54 in *Das Bouch von Guter Spise*, from the Würzburg-Münchener Handschrift (1350), or nr. 51 from an edition from 1844 of another manuscript.

Daz buoch von guoter spise (The Book of Good Food). A Study, Edition, and English Translation of the Oldest German Cookbook. By Melitta Weiss Adamson
Krems 2000 (Medium Aevum Quotidianum, Sonderband IX).

A list of other editions may be found here:
www.dasmittelalterkochbuch.de

German Soul-cakes - “Seelen”

