

Feast and Daily Life in the Middle Ages

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Introduction

Any culture has its feasts. They constitute something like fixed or occasional milestones, dividing the circle of a year and of life in singular sections. The harder and more monotonous this daily life is, the more these feasts will be an occasion to escape this daily life for at least some hours. Feasts always made daily life tolerable or let it forget for a while.

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance time feasts have been celebrated for very different occasions: on the celebration day of a saint, for a wedding or a funeral, during the *adventus*, the arrival of a king or within a chivalrous or also bourgeois tournament. Nevertheless, a feast did not only serve to flee daily life or to point out a special occasion, but it was also established for representation. A main part of communication was held without any words, but through different signs. It always played a major role, and it also plays today, which dresses you wear for which guest, which dishes you will serve or which place you choose for a feast.

Most of the societies of the beginning 3rd millennium have lost a bit the sense for the meaning of feasts. Some people celebrate feasts every day, if they can effort it or if their job is like that. Feasts have mostly lost the exceptional, the unique, the non-repeatable character. In many cases no one realizes the mechanisms of feasts any longer. Thus, rituals become just patterns, but nothing more. Therefore, historians in Europe have begun some years ago to study medieval and early modern feasts and the symbolism within. They did not only focus their interest on only historical aspects, but they have also taken their competence for consulting. Indeed, we can get a lot of knowledge about our nowadays festival culture, when looking back to the feasts of the Middle Ages.

Pictures are one of the most important types of sources concerning feasts and daily life in the Middle Ages, preserved as manuscript illuminations or frescoes. They serve as little windows to a period, which has passed for a long time. From the 16th century onwards oil paintings on canvas became the leading picture source for feasts and other aspects of daily life.

What is a feast? Some general considerations

Any of us knows, what a feast is – or don't you? Searching for a definition you may look into an encyclopedia, but mostly you will be disappointed. The definition only consists of a list of occasions, which people in former or present times used to celebrate feasts, but a definition itself is missing. So, the meaning of "feast" remains diffuse.

From an anthropological point of view man is the "being, who celebrates", as German scholar Uwe Schultz has declared. In the beginning there is the religious feast, making man a celebrating being, but even in early times men started to celebrate half-religious or non-religious feasts. Man is able to celebrate feasts, presumably because he is able to get into distance to himself and his actions. As the only "animal" he is able to leave his daily life aside and to escape from it for some time. In this sense, a feast constitutes a "moratorium to daily life", which is essential for the "eccentric" human being, as German philosopher Odo Marquard has defined.

Based on this obvious need it is necessary to delimitate the feast from daily life, but also daily life from the feast. If a feast stops to stand out from daily life, if it stops to be a feast, if it replaces daily life, any festival culture is lead ad absurdum. The feast consists of the differentiation from daily life, but on the other hand it cannot become the whole reality, and reality cannot become a permanent feast. So, an "absolute" feast, which makes the earth a permanent heaven, would be contradictory to the primary need of the eccentricity of man such as also the complete lack of feasts would be.

Any occasion for a feast has originally been connected with a specific religious behaviour, even if it has been celebrated for very different reasons: the feast for a goddess, the feasts during the rural course of the year, the so-called rites de passage, that is the feasts celebrating the transition from one part of life to another, and the feasts serving as a valve to escape from hard daily life. Defining a feast as a "moratorium to daily life", however, anything will become a feast, which is different to daily life: a weekend trip to the artificial world of a zoo, a vacation travel and even exercising sports.

Community constitutes a second important criterion of a feast: There cannot exist a feast in a quiet, solitude atmosphere, no feast is celebrated alone or even among two persons. A feast will always need a public, either within the family or within a bigger community. Also a wedding cannot be defined as a feast, if it takes place only among the wedding couple, the priest or wedding officer, and two witnesses of the marriage. The relevant criterion is much more the feast, in which a larger group of people participates. Normally there is a large

banquet in the centre, constituting community. Actually we cannot imagine a feast without a banquet; even if the reason for the feast is a funeral, people come together for a funeral repast, as if it was more important to celebrate that the participants are still together in the survivors' community.

Ethnology has pointed out the tendency in numerous cultures to spend "non-sensible amounts" for a feast. The waste for baptisms, weddings, funerals and pilgrimages had sometimes been so enormous that people risked liabilities for many years. In fact, especially a private feast had sometimes the function to delete the extant social hierarchy symbolically and to break the financial limits.

Another criterion of any feast is its transitoriness. In baroque times it has even been one of the principles of a feast that it was absolutely unique. Therefore these feasts are mostly well documented, either by written or painted sources. So, if we consult the sources, we will normally get information about the exceptional and not about daily life. We will never know, how much we can reconstruct daily life from these sources.

Feasts in the Middle Ages

Occasions

There are several groups of medieval feasts, although we have to consider that any type of feast can also be distributed to several classes. So, the model of classes will only serve to bring some order in my lecture.

The first group includes the mainly religious feasts during the course of the year. On the one hand we have to look at each Sunday. Since the story of the creation of world, preserved in the book of Genesis, the seventh day of the week had to be celebrated as “the day of the Lord”. During the third century A.D. the Jewish Sabbath had been replaced in early Christian church by the Sunday, the day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So, Sunday constituted a regularly repeated exit from daily life.

In addition to the Sundays there had been celebration days of the church. A special position and meaning had been given to the three so-called feasts of the Lord, that is Christmas, Easter and Whitsunday. But also some other feasts connected with the life of Christ, such as Epiphany (which serves until now as the Christmas date of the orthodox churches), the Ascension of the Lord, and the commemoration days of the most important saints had become fixed feasts during the year. During the Middle Ages people celebrated the commemoration days of Mary, such as Mary’s Candlemas on February 2nd, Mary’s Ascension on August 15th, Mary’s Birth on September 8th and Mary’s Conception on December 8th, but also the commemoration days of the apostles Peter and Paul on June 29th and the days of other apostles, the days of martyrs such as Stephen on December 26th and Lawrence on August 10th, the day of the Frankish national saint Martin on Nov. 11th and the day of the archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael on September 29th. I will show afterwards that these days have also been used for non-religious purposes, for instance as the days to deliver annual tributes.

A second group consisted of exactly these feasts, which on the one hand had a religious character, but on the other hand constituted special days in the rural course of the year. As about 90 percent of the population of the Middle Ages had been working in agriculture or related professions, these feasts concerned the whole society, and even the rest of society, such as the inhabitants of the towns, the clergy and the aristocratic, had been closely connected with this rural rhythm of life, so that they also celebrated these days. The rural feasts were celebrated for sowing and harvest, but also, when the annual tributes, the *decimae* or tenth part of the profit, had to be delivered. According to the products this day had been on

the feast of Michael (on September 29th), of Martin (on November 11th) or on Mary's Candlemas (on February 2nd). Some of these feasts are also alive today, at least in the so-called farmer's rules, connecting a commemoration day with a specific action or weather.

Another group of feasts concerned the private sphere, but also these feasts were based on religious ones. Like in many other cultures, the transition into a new part of life had been celebrated, and is celebrated until now. The beginning of a new life was marked with the baptism and a childbed feast. The beginning adult's age, however, had not been such a clear milestone like in African or American Indian cultures, but the wedding became a very special feast in any case: For most of the girls this celebration constituted the integration within the community of adults, whereas for young men the wedding often took place a long time after reaching adult's age, especially for craftsmen. At least, death was the last transition from the world of the alive to the world of the dead. Besides the wedding, the funeral became the most expensive feast within the circle of life.

Beside these religious and private feasts, there existed various public feasts, even if also these feasts contained religious and private elements; any distinction of these groups is a fluid one. For instance, a wedding normally became a feast for the whole village. On the other hand any fair or a kermis had a religious background, and even carnival or the so-called Fastnacht were understood as the "crazy period" before the forty days of Lent before Easter.

When the feudal and the chivalrous system had been fully established during the High Middle Ages, these leading social groups had to find an identity of their own by celebrating courtly feasts. So, they distinguished themselves from the rest of the people. Aristocratic festival culture, consisting of tournaments, courtly poetry and music, but also of expensive banquets, was shown openly to the public, representing the own personality or the own social group in general. Town citizens and craftsmen, however, were organized in brotherhoods and guilds; they demonstrated their community by celebrating common procession, such as on the commemoration day of the patron saint of their town or of their profession.

The emperor or king had a special need of representation, when travelling from one town to another. Entering a town, his arrival, the so-called *adventus*, became a big spectacle. In this way he sovereign demonstrated his power, yet he had to show it like that, because this event was the only possibility to show his status not only to a small group of aristocrats, but to the entire population. So, the king did not only arrive: he appeared.

Feast and daily life

Defining a feast as the opposite of daily life, the moratorium, we will nowadays only be able to distribute a day or an event either to the one or to the other side. According to medieval thinking, however, this contrast became, in fact, blurred all the time. Daily life was divided into sections by the periodical feasts, but in this way daily life also referred to them. Feasts also had social and political functions. So, feast and daily life together constituted the whole medieval world.

We may consider that the people living in the Middle Ages were free of labour on about 80 to 100 days a year. The amount of commemoration days, which were celebrated beside the 52 Sundays of a year, varied between 40 and about 60. Especially after the most important religious feasts, such as Christmas, Easter and Whitsunday, people did not work for a whole week.

Work was forbidden on these days, including not only the work of the peasants and craftsmen, but also even female textile work at home. It was also prohibited to hold a fair or a judicial hearing, and also profane professions such as battles or travels were forbidden in many regions. In some penitentials (these are books including strong living rules for clergy and lay people and also the consequences, if they failed to do so) even sexual contact was forbidden on Sundays. So, the festival calendar deeply influenced also daily working and living.

There is much evidence that people did not always keep the duty to go to Holy Mass and to refrain from work on Sundays and other religious feasts, because this question is often mentioned in different types of written and painted sources, containing complaints of clergymen that rules were not followed. Sometimes even miracles had to bring back people to obtain the Sunday rest. Gregory of Tours, maybe the most important early medieval Frankish chronicler (538-594), wrote in his "Historia Francorum" that the Frankish city of Limoges had been destroyed by a tremendous lightning in 591, because the citizens had not paid attention to the Sunday rest, but had done even public work. From the High and Late Middle Ages there are preserved several frescoes with a so-called "Celebration day Christ", showing Jesus Christ surrounded with all the tools people were not allowed to use on Sundays.

During the Late Middle Ages, however, merchants tried to optimise their profits, and therefore they tried to reduce the days without work. Even Martin Luther had started an attempt to remove all commemoration days beside the Sundays, but finally he also accepted the commemoration days of the most important saints.

Religious feasts were mostly celebrated by the whole community. Everybody participated in extraordinary feasts, such as the translation of the bones of a saint, because one might expect miracles within these processions. Also attending the Holy Mass on Sunday became a communicative event for all social classes; everybody wore his best clothes and prepared special dishes. Even today we can observe such rituals on the countryside all over Europe. After the Holy Mass men come together and drink beer at the so-called Fröhshoppen, whereas their wives go home immediately to prepare something special for lunch. In the Middle Ages some clergymen criticized this behaviour, such as Hrabanus Maurus, an abbot and famous scientist at the monastery of Fulda in Germany.

Let me bring another example, how much daily life had been influenced by the feasts. During the Late Middle Ages the daily date was not calculated like in Roman times or like nowadays, following a system of months, but everything was orientated to the major commemoration days. So, the daily date followed the pattern: On Thursday after the feast of Lawrence (on August 10th) in the year of 1317, that is (in our case) August 11th. So, people did not take the saint of the day, but the prominent saint, who had been nearest. This way of calculating daily dates had also been used for charters of kings, aristocrats, clergymen and other people. (So, my students in Austria have to do some mathematics during their first term, but there is a very useful book for such problems, including schedules for every year.)

In many cases important acts such as coronations, assemblies, banquets, weddings, but even judicial hearings and battles took place on religious feasts and commemoration days. As you will remember I have just told you some minutes ago that such work had been forbidden on Sundays, but life in the Middle Ages sometimes is quite contradictory. Especially the coronations of emperors and kings were held mostly on one of the highest religious feasts, and the coronations of popes nearly every time took place on days like Easter or Whitsunday. Courtly feasts, both real ones and the ones in courtly literature, were held on high religious celebration days as well. It is not surprising that 55 percent were celebrated on Whitsunday. Finally most of the medieval fairs took place around the commemoration day of an important saint, in particular in June or between August and November. This last detail will show you, how close religious and economic affairs had been connected.

Mentalities of celebrating feasts

It is the nature of many narrative sources, especially of those produced in the Middle Ages, to find only the unusual worth reporting. Most of the documents do not refer to monotonous

daily life, but to events, which were different in any sense, such as disasters or feasts. So, the question of how people in the Middle Ages celebrated feasts is necessarily linked to special situations, but because of this, it may be answered more easily than that concerning the relationship between man and daily life in general.

History of mentalities of the last years mainly explores the perception, interpretation and management of events and general living conditions. These subjective responses are always based on specific patterns of 'mentalities' or attitudes. This term has been introduced by the French *Annales* school, but is now often used very inaccurately. In the German speaking literature it is sometimes completely avoided. I would suggest defining mentalities as horizons of experience, and the sum of all the factors determining the possibilities (and also the impossibilities) of thinking and acting in a given society or in parts of that society.

Fully reconstructing the mentalities of people in the Middle Ages is almost impossible due to the lack of good sources; therefore, I would like to introduce the term 'mentality bound' for my approach, because I will only be able to focus on a few aspects of medieval mentalities. As a medievalist you have to 'read between the lines' and to interpret the symbolic meaning of signs.

Let me give you an example: There has survived a great number of regulations concerning feasts from the German and French speaking regions. These regulations may serve as sources for the mentalities of the people, for instance that many common people did extreme effort to celebrate a private feast, such as a wedding or a funeral. On the other hand we may not say, how many of the weddings were, in fact, concerned by the regulations, or if people really had to pay the whole amount of the fines mentioned in the sources.

We have also to consider, whether these big expenses more served for self-representation or whether they had been a general characteristic of a specific medieval festival culture. If you compare private feasts in nowadays Western Europe to the ones in Mediterranean or oriental cultures, it comes clear that different mentalities of celebrating feasts are in fact responsible for the size and the expenses, no matter if the financial and social background of the person, who organizes the feasts, is higher or lower.

Looking at the extravagance and waste of medieval feasts, the master of Austrian daily life history, Harry Kühnel, has pointed out the 'mentality of the number'. Most of the reports contain records concerning the size of a feast, for instance on the number of men (but also of horses) during the procession, when the emperor arrived in a town, or how many courses were served during a banquet. This tendency to reach a higher quantity, but also quality, the tendency to exaggerate and to be more expensive than the others, reflects the need for

representation, the need to demonstrate power and status, but also to show community and identification within a society.

Another problem is caused by literary topic. Numerous sources concerning feasts in the Middle Ages are mainly literary documents, but not sources, which were intended to be historical documents. So, these literary descriptions, for instance of courtly tournaments, follow specific rules. They adjust motifs, because they symbolize specific attitudes or mentalities. In some cases we are not able to distinguish, whether a details or an attitude is only literary topic or individual reality.

Let me give you an example: According to the rules of chivalrous life a knight had to follow a large number of regulations, which served to distinguish him from other social classes. These regulations mainly concerned his behaviour towards women and towards his enemy in a battle or in a tournament. We may not say for sure, if these chivalrous attitudes are only constructed by literature and pictures about a non-existing reality or not.

So, we have to read "between the lines" again to interpret the symbolic meaning of signs. In this way, we reach one of the most complicated parts concerning feasts in history: the questions about symbolic communication, both between the author and the reader (or spectator) and between the acting persons in a textual or picture source itself.

Symbolic communication and representation

Any communication is not only made by words, but far more through signs and symbols, by acting and non-acting or by gestures. Nowadays the sensitivity to realize such signs has often gone lost, but it is still present especially in political and diplomatic behaviour. So, it has been an important sign that Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachov and later on Boris Jelzin met the German chancellor Helmut Kohl at the dacha and not in Kremlin palace. Instead of fine dresses they wore comfortable pullovers and walked around talking. In this way, they showed to the public: We negotiate in a familiar atmosphere of friendship.

During the Middle Ages there had also been written communication, but especially between the educated elite symbolic communication has been extremely important. The more complex a message is, the more they chose also a symbolic communication. So, this is not a sign of a lack of written texts and illiteracy.

This form of communication is in particular important to show community within a social group, a guild, a brotherhood, a church community. This was shown both in daily life and within a feast. In medieval sources this communication is often called *repraesentatio*.

During the last years there has been made much research on representation for the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. Representation mostly means the sum of various signs and acting to show a special social status or the ideal living attitudes of it.

Especially for aristocracy since the 12th and 13th century, first appearing in France and later on also in the Holy Roman Empire. There has been built up a courtly space of its own, which became more and more different from traditional aristocratic attitudes. These new courtly attitudes included language, gesture, body language, dresses, but also music, tournaments, banquets, processions and various other ceremonies. This new aristocratic self-consciousness has also been shown by a special architecture, music, literature and other types of contemporary arts.

In a feudal system status was only partly given by birth. In a far larger scale members of the highest and upper classes had to prove their status by successful acting, especially among other people, who also possessed a privileged status. Contrary to nowadays there has not been a monopoly for power and authority within a state. In spite of traditional right, which had also been written down, a privileged public decided, whose status had been right or not. This also concerned the sovereign himself. He had always to try to find a common solutions and decisions together with other powerful men. So, any of these privileged people had to prove his honour and status again and again.

Places and architecture used for feasts

Feasts also need a special place and frame, not only because of the often big amount of participants. Most of the feasts had a religious nucleus, so that they started with a Holy Mass inside the church. But afterwards people normally left the church itself. Describing these places for feasts we should distinguish between public space, temporary and permanent architecture.

Originally people met on a village square, especially in front of the church. So, they sometimes also celebrated and dances between the gravestones around the church. Also nowadays, the squares in front of the churches often serve as meeting points for annual fairs or other spectacles.

More and more celebrations were held on significant places, which were located not in the city centre, but also on hills or at the border of the towns. In Southern Germany often linden trees (lime trees, *Tilia*) or even little woods of linden trees constituted a preferred place for celebrations, such as weddings, games and dancing, but also for judicial hearings. According

to a travel report, written by German aristocrat Hans von Waldheim, there had been 52 linden trees at the so-called Lindenhof (linden court) in Zurich, Switzerland. People were sitting under them, playing chess and other games, holding competitions with their crossbows or large wedding banquets. Linden trees and linden woods are, therefore, a fixed motif in many traditional songs deriving from central and Western Europe.

Another important place for celebrations had been bridges near the town. This fact is illuminated by the famous French song “Sur le pont d’Avignon l’on y danse ...” (On the bridge of Avignon people dance ...). In fact, people seemingly did not dance on the bridge, but under the bridge, especially when a low water level allowed to walk on the gravel stones or sand along the riverside.

Temporary architecture has also become very important for celebrations. Tents were erected not only before battles, but also during tournaments or for the huge courtly feast in Mainz 1184, when the emperor Frederic I (named Barbarossa / Red Beard) invited thousands of knights from Germany and the neighbour regions to take part at the donation of the sword to his sons Henry and Frederic.

Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy, however, used to travel around with his prefabricated wooden residence, which had to be built up every day (see picture zelte01.tif). Other Burgundian dukes, such as Philippe le Hardi had even erected a little town of his own, consisting of tents and wooden watchtowers and walls; even a portcullis protected the entrance to his tent.

Wooden scaffolds were erected inside the big dining halls to replay battles during a big banquet. When king Charles V of France invited the Holy Roman emperor Charles IV and his successor Wenzel in 1378, the siege of Jerusalem by Gottfried (Godefroy) of Bouillon had been presented (see picture mahl02.bmp). According to the so-called Chronicle of Froissart the battle for Troja had been replayed during the banquet to celebrate the arrival of Isabeau de Bavière in Paris (1389). The scaffold showing the castle of Troja had been 40 feet high and 20 feet long. The spectacle had been so exciting that several courtly ladies became unconscious; finally the spectacle had been interrupted before the end.

There are also festival places with permanent architecture, especially at the end of the Middle Ages: specific halls inside the bigger towns served as places for weddings and other feasts; in this way, regulations to the amount of guests and to the expenses for food and drinking could be set. Wedding ceremonies also took place in public baths. People sat inside the basins, talking, eating and celebrating.

For the representation of the sovereign special balconies and similar buildings were erected. In this way, they could show themselves or special insignia or relics to the public. Big halls inside the castles allowed to organize even little tournaments: the so-called Wladislaw hall in the royal castle of Prague on the Hradshin hill is 62 to 16 meters large and could be reached by riding on a horseback.

Dining and drinking

There has already pointed out the central character of dining together during a feast. Banquets could create community and show status. During the Middle Ages they also reminded of the Last Supper; in the Christian tradition the community of Jesus Christ and his apostles had been repeated by any dinner.

Nowadays, medieval dining is connected with many clichés, both in children's books and on modern so-called medieval festivals: the alleged medieval dishes contain potatoes and tomatoes, although they have been brought from America to Europe only in the 16th century. These clichés are not only caused by negligence, but also by the lack of sources telling about the details of medieval cuisine. Even if there have survived numerous cookery books from the Late Middle Ages (French, English, but also German and Italian), they hardly include detailed recipes and records about the amounts, because they were written for professionals.

During the whole Middle Ages, the big royal and courtly banquets played an important role for the representation of the host. He could show all his power and richness, by the dishes themselves, by the decoration, and by the performances. On the other hand, the guest was honoured by his invitation, reflecting his social status and influence.

These large banquets needed long-term preparations, which often lasted for many months. When Alexander III of Scotland married Margaret, the daughter of Henry III of England, in York (1251), cattle and other animals were bought several months in advance; wine, poultry, rabbits and pigs were ordered at the local sheriffs. One month before the wedding bread, fish and luxury goods, such as rice, almonds and sugar were bought to prepare 68.500 loaves of bread, 10.000 pieces of haddock (i è êø à) and 700 pieces of poultry.

Also Maitre Chiquart, the cook of the duke of Savoy (14th century), described the preparations for a festival banquet in great detail, but more generally. Officers should visit the kitchen and the banquet rooms many months before to check the place. Were there suitable tables for the preparation and the dishes? The banquet should be held for about 4000 participants.

Chiquart's considerations offer us a presumably common problem for the cooks: banquets took place in many different places, which had to be adapted for the feast.

Banquets have also been common in late medieval bourgeoisie: The so-called *Menagier de Paris* is a cooking book, written by an old and highly estimated bourgeois around 1400 for his young wife. When he would have died, she should not cause him any shame. Therefore he instructed her, how to prepare banquets for about 40 guests, where to buy the ingredients, what to take care, and so on.

There have not been special rooms for banquets in the Middle Ages. Normally, the biggest room had been adapted by hanging curtains on the walls. In the banquet halls there was hardly any furniture needed, just the table and the chairs or bench, and the so-called *buffet* that is the table to build up the dishes. On the table hardly any cutlery had been used: knives, spoons and drinking vessels had been shared; forks were not usual (except sometimes for serving); slices of bread served as plates. Pots and other vessels contained soups and sauces. The so-called *nef* ("ship" because it had the shape of a ship) served to put salt pot and cutlery inside; it was normally located in front of the most important person on the table (see picture berry01a.tif).

Contrary to some clichés the straight neighbourhood at the table made a big amount of rules necessary. Before and during the meal people had to wash their hands. Before drinking from a common vessel everybody had to clean his mouth. He must not dip his bread into the salt pot or into the wine, and if he did so, he had to pour away the rest of the wine and care for new one. There have also been religiously based rules: every meal had to be introduced by a prayer; eating and drinking more than necessary should be avoided, because voracity was seen as one of the seven cardinal sins.

During a banquet the participants were sitting according the social order, especially if there were more tables. The king sometimes sat on a stage under a baldachin, whereas the more common guests had to take a seat on a lower level or even in another room. For the wedding of duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy and Margaret of York even the palace of Bruges (nowadays Belgium) had been altered to create four separated dining halls.

It is difficult to reconstruct the different courses of a medieval dinner in general, but there are some fixed patterns. The first course followed dietetic considerations: fruits were served in the beginning, whereas roasted meat appeared only from the second course onwards. As a second course soups, ragouts, boiled and roasted fish, vegetables were presented, followed by roasted meat and further courses in between. The amount and the size of the courses depended from the importance of the dinner. As a dessert sweet, fruits, nuts, but also game (the meat of deer and others) were served, in many times accompanied by the so-called *hypocras* (wine

mixed with spices). The last course was called *boutehors* (remove the guests) and was normally served outside the dining hall; it consisted of spicy sweets and wine.

In Constantinople, Byzantine rituals regulated the banquets of the Eastern Roman emperor very strictly. Ironical stories by Notker Balbulus (late 9th century) and Liutprand of Cremona (10th century) reflect the Western view of these regulations. In his “Gesta Karoli” Notker described the diplomatic mission of a Frankish delegate to the Byzantine court. When he turned around a fish during dinner, the courtiers jumped up and said: Oh, our emperor, have you seen, how much this Frankish delegate has injured you? According to our law he had to be punished by death. The delegate, however, asked to fulfil him a last wish: The emperor should order to blind any of the people, who had seen him turning the fish around. Suddenly, nobody accused him any longer and the delegate returned home safely.

The Byzantine emperors also organized feasts for the poor people, inviting exactly 228 guests at the imperial table. Of course, this invitation was not able to diminish the problems of the lower classes, but just served to represent the emperor himself and to clam down his bad consciousness.

Dresses and similar

For any feast and within any social class, people wore special or at least their best dresses. According to the proverb ‘Dresses make the man’ everybody tried to represent himself by wearing dresses made of precious materials, accompanied by jewels. In epic literature “contests” mentioned frequently, whose outfit had been best. In the so-called Nibelungenlied, the maybe most famous Middle High German epic, Kriemhild and Brunhild even got into a severe struggle. In addition to that, the colour and the type of dresses served to describe the moods of the people: it made a big difference, if the hero was dressed in colourful or black dresses, or if he even broke courtly dressing rules by arriving at the dinner in a bloody armour.

Within the courtly tournament culture, helmets and coats of arms had a specific function to represent the people bearing them. Coats of arms are coloured signs to distinguish and represent single people, dynasties or communities and are given to them forever. They firstly appeared in 12th century France and were originally painted or affixed at the shield. The Middle High German expression *wâpen* for coat of arms shows the connection to the word “weapon” (in German: “Waffen”).

In the first century of use, coat of arms were restricted to members of higher aristocracy, but from the 13th century onwards also the so-called *ministeriales* used coats of arms. The *ministeriales* originally were semi-free officers at the court of a higher aristocrat, who became more and more important during the High Middle Ages. Finally they constituted a social class of their own, which is mostly known as the “the knights” or “chivalry”. To distinguish themselves from peasants and town citizens they built up chivalrous culture, symbolized by coat of arms and helmet.

The helmets up to the 13th century mostly served for the battle, whereas from the 14th and 15th centuries onwards two types of helmets came in use, which were only taken for tournaments. The so-called joust helmet had a characteristic peaked shape with a small opening for the eyes; it should protect the knight in the tournament battle with lances (joust). The strap helmet, however, was used for the mass tournaments (buhurt). The opening for the eyes was much wider and protected by straps. On the top of these helmets a decoration was fixed. It consisted of feathers, horns or wooden statues. It served to distinguish the single members of a family from each other. Before a tournament the helmet and its decoration were brought to the herald, who had to decide, whether the bearer was worth to take part at the contest or not.

Music, dances and games

Music and dance were a frame of all types of medieval feasts. Especially the minnesongs, the songs to worship a lady of high social status, became very popular. High and low aristocrats exercised themselves in composing and performing them, although there had rarely been any success for them. No matter, if the lady was married or not, it constituted a specific part of courtly culture. Sometimes the ladies seemingly agreed to the courting and let a basket on a rope down to the minnesingers outside the castle walls. Unfortunately, some ladies only played with them and let down a weak basket, which broke, when throwing the singer up to the lady's domicile. In German there is a proverb deriving from this incident until now: “Einen Korb geben” (“to give a basket”) means to refuse a man's courting, especially, when a man asks a woman for a dance.

Among the minnesingers several classes have to be distinguished. The lowest class consisted of musicians travelling around. They did not only play music, but also gave acrobatic performances or presented vulgar jokes. In Southern France, also female musicians and dancers, the so-called *ioglaressae*, are found in the sources.

The second class consisted of low aristocrats, who had mostly got a good basic education in a monastery; sometimes they were former priests or monks, who had given up their profession. They were also able to read and write and could, therefore, also work as officers at the aristocratic courts. So, composing and performing minnesongs had been one of several professions for them. Most of the very famous minnesingers, such as Walther von der Vogelweide, come from this class.

The third and highest class were high aristocrats, who tried to be artists as well. They sang their minnesongs just for pleasure, but mostly without being dependent from it. Nevertheless, to be a minnesinger could promote the own career, as the example of Oswald of Wolkenstein shows. He managed to climb up from a less important aristocratic to be a diplomat for the emperor Sigismund in the early 15th century.

The music during a banquet was normally performed by the first group, in some cases maybe by the second group, but we may consider that they did not get too much attention. There is hardly any evidence that after dinner real “minnesong concerts” had been presented. So, we have to doubt, if there had really been performances as described in medieval literature. It rather seems that the minnesingers themselves inserted such passages to show how they wished to be recognized with their music.

Dances took place in any type of feast: on the countryside, in the towns and on the court. Whereas the peasants used to dance in a group, the higher social classes preferred pair dances following a clear sequence of steps.

Tournaments were the most important game during a feast both on the court and in the towns, but they will be discussed in detail, when focussing on courtly feasts below. Beside them also competitions were organized, which can be described as sports in our sense. Especially during town feasts from the 15th century onwards running contests took place, one for men, one for women and one for horses. They were officially organized by the town administration. Even if the “sportsmen” and “sportswomen” mostly came from the lower classes and sometimes even from a prostitute milieu, all people watched the spectacle. As a prize the winners received a piece of fine linen. In this way, women could get one of the necessary goods for the wedding dowry.

Religious and profane feasts during the year

There has been made mention before about religious feasts and the attitudes, when celebrating theme. Therefore, the following chapters constitute both a repetition and summary.

Christmas, Easter and Whitsunday

The three so-called feasts of the Lord have been the summits of every course of the year. Therefore people did not work on the feast itself, but also not during the following week. On the other hand Christmas and Easter had been made even higher through a period of Lent before.

During the Middle Ages many official meetings and profane feast had been connected with the religious feast, for instance big councils, coronations and other important events. As an example I want to focus on the coronation of Charlemagne in Rome at Christmas 800. Making Charlemagne an emperor had been planned since several months, presumably since 799, when pope Leo III had visited Charlemagne in Paderborn (Germany). Leo had been accused of corruption and other criminal affairs. So, he tried to win Charlemagne as his protector. The Frankish king himself arrived in Rome in November 800. Leo received him just 12 miles outside the city walls, a very important sign, because the Byzantine emperor only had the privilege to be received 6 miles outside. After calming down some struggles between pope Leo III and Roman aristocracy, Charlemagne was prepared for coronation during the Christmas Mass on December 25th. According to the report of his biographer Einhard, Charlemagne had been extremely surprised of it so that he would have even refused to go to church on such a special feast, but we may presume that this has just been a topos of modesty and humbleness. In fact, such an event needed months of preparation.

Feasts for important saints

On each of the commemoration days for an important saint people did not only retain from work, but also celebrated it with specific processions, especially if it was the patron of the parish church or of the whole town, or at least of an important craft. In some cases, these processions could also cause severe struggles between the social groups within a town. In the Eastern French city of Colmar, for instance, the bakers once strove for more than ten years to receive the privilege to bear candles with them during the annual procession for the town

patron. In any case, it had a symbolic meaning, in which position you were allowed to take place at the procession or which special privileges you had got.

As the example of the Florentine citizens during the council of Constance shows (see picture file richen01.tif), people did not only celebrate the feast of their patron at home, but also if they were abroad. They organized a procession to a church dedicated to the saint, and invited also other people to participate. In the case of the procession for Saint John in Constance, also cardinals and high profane sovereigns were among the people following the procession of the Florentine citizens. So, the saint himself had been worshipped even more.

Carnival and other “upside down” feasts

There is hardly any feast, which can be defined better as a ‘moratorium to daily life’ than the so-called Fastnacht or Fasching or carnival. Like nowadays people have had the need to escape their daily life at least for a short time every year. In Roman antiquity, the Saturnalia, that is the feast for Saturn celebrated in the second half of December, had become more and more a public feast, where everything was upside down. Any social classification had been fallen down, yet even the slaves, normally treated as ‘things’ (*res*) without any human right, behaved like their possessors and were served by them.

In the medieval and early modern sources there have been expressed both critical and approving remarks about the crazy Fastnacht. Augustin Holzapfel, for instance, a German clergyman from the 15th century, remarked in one of his sermons the following: ‘Jesus has made dead people being alive again, but Fasching makes living people dead, when they kill each other struggling with a sword or a knife. But on the other hand, Fasching manages to make lame persons able to walk again. Even these old women, who can hardly sit with their textile work during the year, throw away their stilts and worship Saint Fasching with their dances.’

So, Fasching or Fastnacht constituted an important valve for common people. The leading classes, therefore, feared that there might come out even conspiracies or revolutions. They introduced strict regulations, for instance that nobody was allowed to wear a mask, which made him not identifiable. Especially during the 15th century, however, ‘wild man’ and ‘wild woman’ masks became very popular, but obviously they have been tolerated in most of the towns.

Especially craftsmen, who had to follow very strict rules of behaviour during the year (for instance, they were not allowed to marry, unless they became a master), took a very active

role during this feast. They performed plays with very rude and obscene content. Within these plays they could criticize the sovereigns, mostly according to the pattern that the “common man” was the cleverer one and succeeded, therefore.

The craftsmen also organized processions, dances and pseudo-jousts. In Nuremberg the butchers led around a big sausage during a procession within the so-called Schembartlauf. Pictures from Nuremberg, Augsburg and other towns in Southern Germany show craftsmen riding on wooden wagons, accompanied by fools and musicians playing unusual instruments, such as sack-pipes instead of trumpets, during the tournament. On their helmet they do not wear a normal decoration, but playing cards, sausages or an ordinary hat with a beard of a goat (see pictures).

Feasts during the way of life – Between family and public space

In any culture the so-called *rites de passage*, that are the transitions from one part of life to another, are celebrated. During the Middle Ages especially baptism, wedding and funeral had been the occasions to celebrate extraordinary feasts within a family or mostly rather in a wider public. They were unique and, therefore, people sometimes spent enormous expenses for them. They became summits of a whole lifetime or “concentrations of human life” as German historian Arno Borst has described them. So, they reflect that people in the Middle Ages had been always conscious to a near “turning point”, to death.

Medieval administration always tried to set regulations for these private feasts, no matter if it concerned the price of the wedding dress, the number of invited (and also not invited) guests, the amount of musicians or the place of the feast. More than 500 regulations for baptisms, weddings and funerals have been come up to our times from the German speaking countries dating between the 13th and 15th centuries. More than half of them concern weddings, about 35 percent baptisms and about 15 percent funerals.

The purposes of these regulations have been various: to protect the people from high liabilities, which could also reduce the general wish to get married and to get children; to prevent that there are more guests during the wedding dinner than during Holy Mass (a completely moralizing argument); to protect local economy by regulating that the musicians or the beer had to come from the home town of the wedding couple. Sometimes a wedding couple was only allowed to celebrate an “evening wedding” instead of a “day wedding”. So, the time for celebrations had been shortened. These regulations have been controlled by town officers, who took part at the feast, but we hardly know, if all the fines mentioned in the regulations have really been paid.

Baptism and childbed feasts

The feasts accompanying the birth of a child have presumably been the only ones reserved for a small familiar community. In some cases even the father of the child was not allowed to take part. In this way, baptisms and in particular childbed feasts became pure female celebrations.

According to the high risk of births in pre-modern societies the successful birth had been celebrated with a big feast. Female friends and relatives came to the childbed of the your mother and brought lots of food and (mostly alcoholic) drinks with them. Also the baptism of

the child had been a reason for large celebrations. Sometimes the preparations for baptism took so much time that the child had already died before. Following the common belief in the Middle Ages (and also until the early 20th century), this child was, then, lost to the devil. Therefore, some clergymen criticized in their sermons these attitudes to prepare a big banquet and to look for up to nine godfathers and godmothers. The end of childbed and the re-integration of the young mother into community have also been celebrated. After going the Holy Mass for the first time after accouchement the group of women visited a pub, where they might have drunk as much as their husbands.

Especially at the end of the Middle Ages the public authorities wanted to get power upon these mere female celebration communities. They tried to reduce the amount of women, who were allowed to come to childbed; they regulated the dishes and the amount of alcoholic beverages during baptism; they tried to observe all professions reserved for women, such as midwives. Instead of them, male doctors took part during births more and more.

Wedding

Without any doubt, weddings have been the most important feast within the circle of life. On the one hand, they were often celebrated within the whole community of a village or within at least a large urban community. On the other hand, this public has been not obligatory; according to medieval rites a marriage did neither need the participation of the relatives nor a Holy Mass to promise the wedding to each other. If a man and a woman did so without anyone around, the wedding was, nevertheless, valid forever, but normally the family and some relatives took part. Contrary to antique Roman wedding attitudes, there had been no divorce possible except for very special reasons.

The wedding consisted of several steps: After the father of the bride had agreed to the marriage, the couple came together for the engagement, which constituted the centre of the whole wedding. If the couple had been rich, all questions concerning their property had been decided in an oral or written treaty. Then, the wedding couple gave their hands to each other or drank for the good luck of the marriage. In this way, the bride changed into the “property” of the bridegroom, shown by various symbols: the bridegroom stepped on the foot of the bride or dedicated a slipper to her – a sign that she had to live in his house from now onwards. So, the German expression “Pantoffelheld” (hero of the slippers) for a man, who stays at home and has no power towards his wife, reflects the other way round of this wedding attitude.

After these ceremonies the couple spent their wedding night, and on the next day they went to church for the wedding mass. After all the marriage was brought into a wider public for the wedding banquet. The guests also brought presents with them, for instance animals or tools for the household, but also symbolic things like scissors for the bride, so that she can cut the ribbon of love, if her husband will not be faithful.

In any social class marriages had been mainly necessary for several reasons, but not often for love. Peasants married, because it had been impossible to do all the work on the fields and in the house alone. Especially in the higher classes weddings served to strengthen and to increase the power of the dynasty. If a dynasty seemed to die out in the near future, the remaining female members of the family became even more attractive, no matter, if they were old widows. When the Babenberg dukes of Austria and Styria died out in 1246, Přemysl Otakar of Bohemia married one of the last female members of the family, Margaret. Otakar was even less than 20 at this time, but Margaret more than 40. On the other hand, if a highly aristocratic couple married also because of their love, such as the later emperor Maximilian I and Mary of Burgundy in 1477, it had been worth reporting to the chroniclers.

Funeral

From the Christian point of view, death did not constitute the end of life, but even more the ‘birthday’ for eternal life. Also when celebrating the commemoration day of a saint, it has never been his ‘normal’ birthday, but the day of his death on earth.

The procession within a funeral has been celebrated in most of the Christian churches with large expenses. Therefore, clergyman frequently criticised the behaviour to spend enormous sums of money for the funeral towel, the tombstone and the banquet. So, in some towns, such as Worms in Germany, the funeral banquet had been completely forbidden, and in other towns even the size of the candles had been regulated.

Especially among high aristocracy, kings and queens in the Late Middle Ages the funeral served as a last representation of the sovereign, but at the same time as the first representation of his successor. Therefore, the originally private character of a funeral had been given up. This way to show status had been extremely important for any dynasty, because the feudal system was built on personal relationships of subordination, and in fact there had not been a hereditary monarchy. In this way, sovereigns looked for specific burial places to follow extant traditions.

The funerals during the late 15th and 16th centuries sometimes lasted for several months. When the Holy Roman emperor Frederic III died in 1493 in the Austrian city of Linz, his body had firstly been presented to the public for three days in a sitting position. Then, secondly, his heart and other inner organs were buried separately in the parish church of Linz. Thirdly he was brought to Vienna, the capital of his empire, and presented to the public also there, but in a lying position. Nine days after his death he was buried in Vienna provisionally; six bishops and many other high clergymen took part at this event. Four months later, after large preparations, Frederic was buried for a second time. According to the sources, nearly 9000 holy masses had been celebrated for him at this time, and 80.000 people watched the procession. Even if these numbers are seemingly far too high, they nevertheless show that the funeral for an emperor had been an event of representation for a large public. Finally, 20 years after his death, Frederic was buried for a third time, when his precious marble sarcophagus had been finished.

Public feasts

Feasts accompanying the emperor, king or pope

“God may beware us of any disaster ...and of that the emperor will come too often to our town”, had been a common proverb in the Middle Ages. Indeed, the arrival (*adventus*) and the lodging of the sovereign constituted a marvellous spectacle, but the expenses had to be paid mostly by the hosts. Even if the frequent visit of the emperor might have been honourable for the town, paying for him and his court could quickly diminish the wealth of a town.

The emperor or king did not only arrive at the town, he even appeared, especially when he came for the first time after his coronation. The so-called *adventus* followed a tradition from Greek and Roman antiquity, when the emperor had been worshipped both as sovereign and as god. Triumphal arches, decorated with relieves celebrating his deeds, were erected just for the moment, when the victorious leader of the imperial army marched through the Forum Romanum to the Capitol Hill. In Christian Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, however, these *adventus* emphasized the eminent position of the king, which was given to him by god himself. The sovereign, in fact, stood on a level of his own, as a mediator between heaven and earth. It constituted a permanent ceremony within the Byzantine Empire, whereas in the West this tradition got lost for some centuries. Under the reign of Charlemagne this ritual has been re-invented, and it became an important constitutional ceremony to show the monarch as an almighty person. The arrival of the emperor also symbolizes the idea of medieval reigning attitudes by travelling from palatinate to palatinate.

The symbolism of the *adventus* can be clearly seen, when analysing the adventus of Charlemagne in Rome before his coronation on Dec. 25th, 800. During his earlier visits in Rome (774, 781 and 787) he was received and honoured by the representatives of the town one mile outside the city walls. Then he was accompanied to the cathedral St. Peter, which was located outside the town at this time; there the pope himself received him. In this way, Charlemagne was declared a honourable foreign sovereign, but he stood clearly at a lower step than the Byzantine emperor. When Charlemagne returned to Rome in November 800, he was received by pope Leo III and the representatives of the city twelve miles outside the town. Then he approached to the city in a triumphal procession. In this way, Charlemagne was elevated to a higher than the Byzantine emperor, who had the privilege to be received six miles outside the city walls. Nevertheless, we should not forget that pope Leo III had visited

Charlemagne in Paderborn one year before and had asked for his protection, because in Rome he had been accused of corruption and other severe punishable acts.

During an *adventus* there have mostly celebrated large feasts among the common people including banquets and dancing. When the Holy Roman emperor Frederic III arrived in Frankfurt for the first time, he presented a big ox to the public, which had been filled with a veal, a pork and a chicken. In addition to that, wine came out of a fountain. During the *adventus* it happened for the only time that people could see their emperor. The extreme difference between the living attitudes of the common people and the monarch will have caused a very strong impression.

Also the popes seem to have celebrated their *adventus* in a similar way, although we have hardly any notice about them. When they travelled around in their territory in nowadays middle Italy they took a large court with them, consisting of about 500 people. One of the few reports, written by Richard of San Germano in the 13th century, is quite remarkable. Richard also mentions that there took place a tournament to honour the pope. However, for many other occasions the popes had explicitly forbidden these cruel games and had even threatened the knights with the exclusion of the Christian community.

Chivalrous and bourgeois tournaments and Round Table feasts

Tournaments constitute the most typical event in a chivalrous life. The knights could represent themselves at such a feast, and therefore these feasts are often very well documented. Nevertheless, the new upper classes in the towns tried to imitate the courtly culture by organizing tournaments inside the towns. During the Fastnacht the craftsmen made even jokes of the tournaments: they rid on wooden wagons instead of on horses, they wore dresses like fools or were accompanied by fools and even monkeys, they used helmets with funny decoration, such as sausages or windmills made of playing cards. The knights, however, tried to exclude the town citizens by introducing strict rituals: the invitation by the herald, the review of the helmets on the evening before the tournament, the specific rules for the battles themselves.

There are two different types of tournaments, the so-called *buhurt* and the so-called *joust*. Originally, only mass battles (*buhurt*) took place. Two teams tried to capture the members of the rivals or to beat down the helmet decoration by using non-sharpened swords or clubs. During a *joust* always two fighters tried to push the other one from the horse with a long lance. Heralds served as organizers and judges of the tournament.

Beside the tournaments, the chivalrous aristocrats wanted to distinguish themselves from other classes by celebrating Round Table feasts. Following the legend of king Artus and his companions the knights behaved according to specific rules, because also in the legend only the brave and righteous were allowed to approach to the Round Table. In Winchester castle, England there has survived a round table, which shows that the imitation of Artus had not only been fiction. Every place on the table is marked with the inscription of two names, the one of the hero in the legend and the one of the real person. However, the town citizens started to imitate even this feast.

Urban feasts

Most of the urban feasts, which have survived from the Middle Ages until now, are based on religious traditions, even if they are rather tourist spectacles nowadays. Until today the so-called *Palio delle Contrade* takes place in the Italian town of Siena on July 2nd and August 16th. On the central Piazza del Campo the quarters of the town compete with a horse ride in traditional costumes. It can be testified by written sources since 1147 and had got his nowadays form after a victorious battle against the permanent rival Florence in 1260. For this victory, the godmother Mary herself was said to have supported the Senese.

In the morning of the feast the jockey and his horse are blessed in the local church of the quarter. During that ceremony the jockey has to kiss the relics of the patron. So, he gets something like a religious aura. In the late afternoon, all quarters and all professions present themselves in a long procession, wearing historical costumes. At the end, the so-called *palio*, a fine ribbon made of linen, is brought to the main square on a wagon, which is drawn by white cattle. Finally, after waiting many hours in the sun together with more than 100.000 spectators, the exciting horse ride makes the crowd crazy.

There are similar feasts in many other towns in Italy and other countries, such as in Milan, Florence and Venice. In Venice the people lived side by side with the water inside a big lagoon. So, the sea was like a partner in their life. For this purpose, they renewed the wedding with the sea every year by celebrating a long procession. During the ceremony the highest representative of the town, throws a "wedding ring" into the water.

North of the Alps the town feasts were often connected with a big fair. The sovereigns, therefore, granted by charters that all merchants passing by had to come to the fair and had to present their goods for a fixed amount of days. So, the inhabitants could also buy some goods

they did not get on the weekly market. The feast was also accompanied by music and dancing. In this way, religious and economic aspects were closely linked with each other.

Rural feasts

Feasts on the countryside are in some aspects different to the ones on the court or in the towns. In particular, there had been no attempt to represent social status or to create exclusivity. The rural feasts were always open to the whole community of the village and even to visitors from outside. Mostly, people met for the commemoration day of the patron of the local church, the so-called Kirtag ("church day") or kirmes, but also to celebrate a wedding or a funeral together.

Normally, a banquet and dancing constituted the centre of rural feasts, frequently accompanied by quite rude jokes and brutal struggles. Dancing could serve as an important valve to escape daily life, but also to get in contact for a wedding. As far as we see from the rare extant sources, everybody danced. Normally, people danced on the village square in front of the church, which could sometimes mean to dance between the tombstones.

In one of his popular sermons the Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach mentions a priest, who had been hit and killed by a lightning, when ringing the bells of his church. The people interpreted this misfortune as a divine punishment, because the priest had preferred to dance all the time on the local feasts. During one feast he had even won a crown for being the best dancer and had hung it up in front of his house to invite the people for further dances.