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Europe's Hypocritical History of Cannibalism

From prehistory to the present with many episodes in between, the region has a surprisingly meaty history of humans eating humans



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References to acts of cannibalism are sprinkled throughout many religious and historical documents, such as reports of cooked human flesh being sold in 11th-century English markets during times of famine. Here, an engraving by Theodor de Bry depicts hungry Spaniards cutting

down the bodies of thieves hanged by Pedro de Mendoza in order to eat them. © Stapleton Collection/Corbis

In 2001, a lonely computer technician living in the countryside in Northern Germany advertised online for a well-built man willing to participate in a mutually satisfying sexual act. Armin Meiwes' notice was similar to many others on the Internet except for a rather important detail: The requested man must be willing to be killed and eaten.

Meiwes didn't have to look far. Two hundred and thirty miles away in Berlin, an engineer called Bernd Brandes agreed to travel to Meiwes' farmhouse. There, a gory video later found by police documented Brandes' consensual participation in the deadly dinner. The cannibalism was both a shock to the German public and a conundrum to German prosecutors wanting to charge Meiwes with a crime.

Cannibalism might be humanity's most sacred taboo, but consent of a victim typically eliminates a crime, explains Emilia Musumeci, a criminologist at the University of Catania, in Italy, who studies cannibalism and serial killers.

More technically, cannibalism is not designated as illegal in Germany's extensive criminal code: Until that point, laws against murder had sufficed to cover cannibalism. If Brandes had volunteered his own life, how could Meiwes be accused of murder?

Because of his victim's consent, Meiwes was initially found guilty of something akin to assisted suicide, and sentenced to eight years in jail. Had there not been widespread uproar about the seemingly lenient penalty,

Meiwes would be out of jail by now. Instead, the uproar led to a subsequent retrial, where Meiwes was found guilty of killing for sexual pleasure. He will likely spend the rest of his life in jail.

The unusual Meiwes case is just one of the topics to be discussed this weekend at an interdisciplinary cannibal conference to be held at the Manchester Museum—the world's first, say many attending the meeting.

The idea of a cannibalism conference might sound like the basis for a macabre joke about coffee-break finger food. However, there's serious cannibal scholarship taking place in many disciplines, says conference organizer Hannah Priest, a lecturer at Manchester University, who has previously hosted other academic meetings on werewolves and monsters under the banner of her publishing company Hic Dragones. "From contemporary horror film to medieval Eucharistic devotions, from Freudian theory to science fiction, cannibals and cannibalism continue to repel and intrigue us in equal measure," advertises the conference's website.

When the call for abstracts went out last fall, "our first response was one from anthropology, another one was on heavy metal music and the third was on 18th-century literature," Priest says. "Academics will quite happily discuss very disturbing things in quite polite terms and forget that not everybody talks about this stuff all the time."

It is perhaps fitting that the conference should take place in Europe because the region has a long chronicle of cannibalism, from prehistory through the Renaissance, right up to the 21st-century Meiwes case. In addition, the area has bequeathed us a bounty of fictional cannibals, including Dracula, who is

arguably the world's most famous consumer of human blood and a gory harbinger of the current pop culture fascination with vampires and zombies.

Europe boasts the oldest fossil evidence of cannibalism. In a 1999 *Science* article, French paleontologists reported that 100,000-year-old bones from six Neanderthal victims found in a French cave called Moula-Guercy had been broken by other Neanderthals in such a way as to extract marrow and brains. In addition, tool marks on the mandible and femur suggested that tongue and thigh meat had been cut off for consumption.

The cannibalism at Moula-Guercy wasn't an isolated incident in prehistory. In the past decade, researchers have reported other evidence that Neanderthals continued eating each other until just before their disappearance. In one particularly grisly discovery at the El Sidrón cave in Spain, paleontologists discovered that an extended family of 12 individuals had been dismembered, skinned and then eaten by other Neanderthals about 50,000 years ago.

When early *Homo sapiens* began engaging in cannibalism is a topic of debate, although it is clear they eventually did, says Sandra Bowdler, an emeritus professor of archeology at the University of Western Australia. Evidence is scant that this happened in early human hunter-gatherer communities, she says, although in 2009 Fernando Rozzi, at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, in Paris, reported finding a Neanderthal jaw bone that may have been butchered by early humans.

Even if Europe's *Homo sapiens* didn't consume each other in prehistory, they certainly did in more modern times. References to acts of cannibalism are

sprinkled throughout many religious and historical documents, such as the reports that cooked human flesh was being sold in 11th-century English markets during times of famine, says Jay Rubenstein, a historian at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

However, the world's first cannibal incident reported by multiple, independent, first-hand accounts took place during the Crusades by European soldiers, Rubenstein says.

These first-hand stories agree that in 1098, after a successful siege and capture of the Syrian city Ma'arra, Christian soldiers ate the flesh of local Muslims. Thereafter the facts get murky, Rubenstein says. Some chroniclers report that the bodies were secretly consumed in "wicked banquets" borne out of famine and without the authorization of military leaders, Rubenstein says. Other reports suggest the cannibalism was done with tacit approval of military superiors who wished to use stories of the barbaric act as a psychological fear tactic in future Crusade battles.

Either way, post-Crusade European society was not comfortable with what happened at Ma'arra, Rubenstein says. "Everybody who wrote about it was disturbed," he says. "The First Crusade is the first great European epic. It was a story people wanted to celebrate." But first they had to deal with the embarrassing stain.

Part of the problem was that cannibalism at Ma'arra simply didn't fit in with the European self-image. In medieval times, cultural enemies—not military or religious heroes—were commonly depicted as cannibals or giants, "especially in narratives of territorial invasion and conquest," argues

Geradine Heng, in *Cannibalism, The First Crusade and the Genesis of Medieval Romance*. “Witches, Jews, savages, Orientals, and pagans are conceivable as—indeed, must be—cannibals; but in the 12th-century medieval imaginary, the Christian European subject cannot.”

By the 16th century, cannibalism was not just part of the mental furniture of Europeans; it was a common part of everyday medicine from Spain to England.

Initially, little bits of pulverized mummies imported from Egypt were used in prescriptions against disease, but the practice soon expanded to include the flesh, skin, bone, blood, fat and urine of local cadavers, such as recently executed criminals and bodies dug up illegally from graveyards, says University of Durham’s Richard Sugg, who published a book in 2011 called *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires: The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians*.

Medicinal cannibalism reached a feverish pitch around 1680, Sugg says. But the practice can be traced back to the Greek doctor Galen, who recommended human blood as part of some remedies in the 2nd century A.D., and it continued all the way into the 20th century. In 1910, a German pharmaceutical catalog was still selling mummy, says Louise Noble, who also wrote a book on the topic called *Medicinal Cannibalism in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*.

While Europeans ate “mummy” to cure their physical ailments, the same culture sent missionaries and colonists to the New World to cure New World indigenous people of their purported barbaric cannibalism, some of which

was entirely fabricated as a rationale for conquest, Bowdler says. “It’s certainly possible that Europeans were consuming more human flesh at the time than people in the New World,” Sugg says.

“It’s a big paradox,” Noble adds. The term cannibal was being used to describe someone inferior while the “civilized in Europe were also eating bits of the human body,” she says.

The word cannibal first entered the English language in the mid-16th century by means of Spanish explorers, says Carmen Nocentelli, a 16th-century comparative literature and culture scholar at the University of New Mexico. It derives from the Spanish word *Canibales*, which was used by Columbus in his diaries to describe indigenous people of the Caribbean islands who were rumored to be eaters of human flesh, Nocentelli says. In his diaries, it is clear Columbus didn’t initially believe the rumors, she adds.

But the name stuck: Cannibal became a popular term used to describe people in the New World. It was certainly sexier than the Greek and then Latin word “anthropophagi,” which a 1538 dictionary defines as “people in Asia, which eat [sic] men,” Nocentelli says.

Because there’s evidence that colonists exaggerated accounts of cannibalism in the New World, some scholars have argued that all cannibalism reports in the colonies were fictitious. But the balance of evidence suggest some reports were certainly true, Bowdler says, namely, from human blood proteins found in fossilized feces at American Southwest sites to first-hand reports from reliable sources about cannibal practices among Mesoamerican Aztecs and Brazilian Tupinambá. “One of the reasons cannibalism is so controversial is

because we have few detailed accounts of how it worked in society,” Bowdler adds.

Bowdler has been compiling a list of well-documented accounts of worldwide cannibalism that she will present at the conference this weekend. In particular, she’ll discuss categories of cannibalism where consuming human flesh is “not considered out-and-out bad” in the society where it is practiced, she says.

One such category is survival cannibalism, where people consume each other out of absolute necessity, such as the 16 survivors of a 1972 plane crash in the Andes mountains or the members of Sir John Franklin’s failed 1845 expedition to the Arctic.

Another category is mortuary cannibalism, the consumption of the dead during their funeral rites, practiced through the 20th century in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea and the Brazilian and Peruvian Amazon. “This is not, as we may instinctively imagine, morbid and repulsive,” notes the University of Manchester’s Sarah-Louise Flowers in her conference abstract, “but is instead an act of affection and respect for the dead person, as a well as being a means of helping survivors to cope with their grief.”

As some conference attendees compare culturally acceptable categories of human consumption with nefarious cases of cannibal serial killers, other conference presenters will pick apart the presence of cannibals in pop culture, such as the episode of revenge cannibalism in the animated sitcom

South Park, the blockbuster popularity of the vampire romance novel series *Twilight* and the emergence of the *Call Of Duty: Zombies* video game.

With talk titles like “Flesh-Eaters in London: Cosmopolitan Cannibals in Late 19th-Century Fiction and the Press,” “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? Inside the Mind of the Cannibal Serial Killer,” and “Bon Appetit! A Concise Defense of Cannibalism,” one can only hope the conference canapés are vegetarian.

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