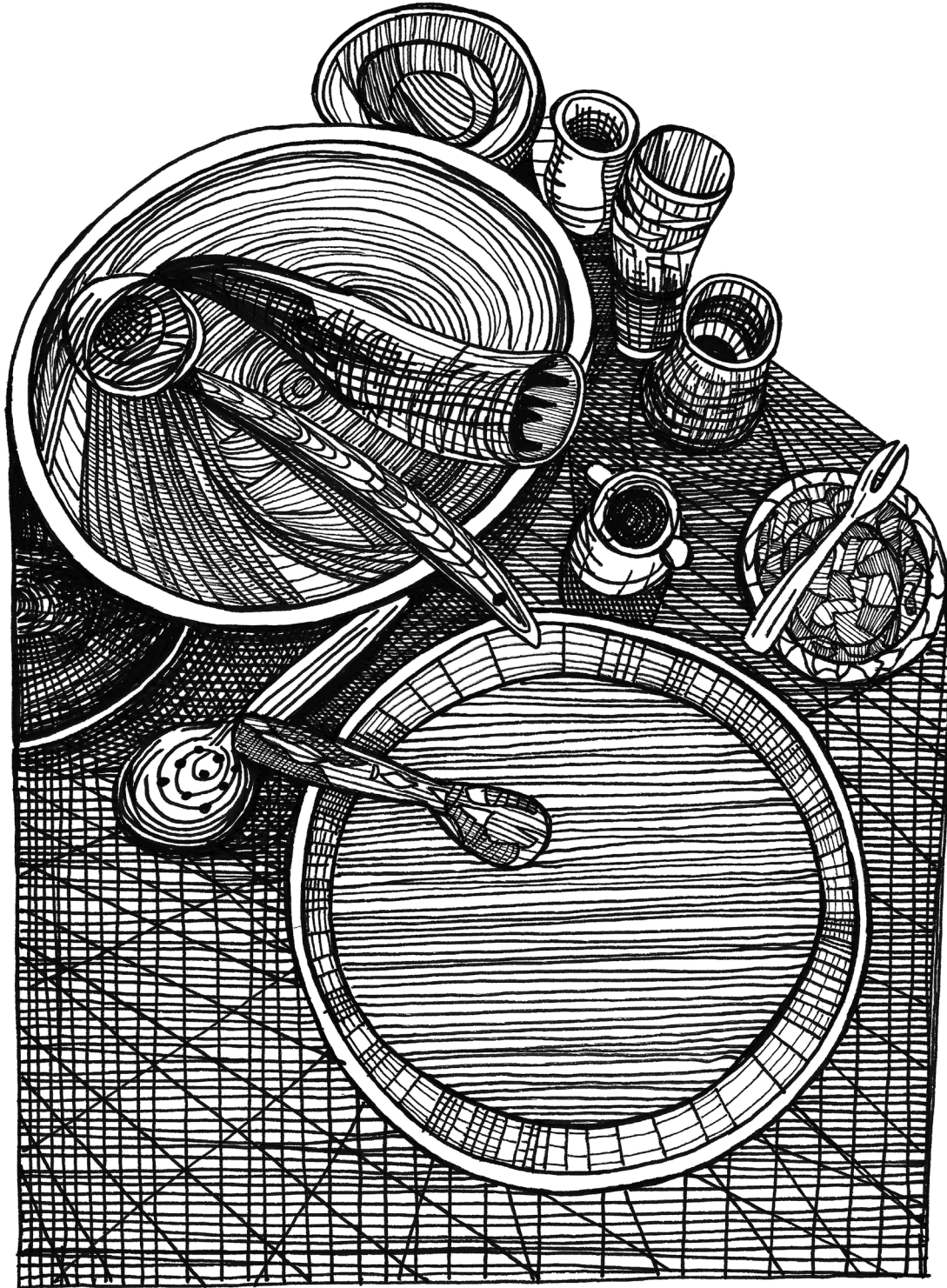


Fodder & Drincan
Anglo-Saxon Culinary History



Fodder & Drincan

Anglo-Saxon Culinary History

Emma Kay



PROSPECT BOOKS
2022

This edition published in 2022 in Great Britain and the USA by Prospect Books at 26 Parke Road, London, SW13 9NG.

Text © 2022 Emma Kay.

The author, Emma Kay, asserts her right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs & Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright holders.

ISBN 9781909248755

Set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Cochin by Catheryn Kilgarrieff and Brendan King.

Printed by the Short Run Press, Exeter.



CONTENTS

⁷ INTRODUCTION

²⁷ CHAPTER ONE MEAT, SEAFOOD & ALL THE FISH

⁶⁷ CHAPTER TWO SOUPS, SAUCES & OILS

⁹⁹ CHAPTER THREE BREADS, RELISHES & DAIRY

¹³³ CHAPTER FOUR WINTER VEGETABLES, SALADS & PRECIOUS EGGS

¹⁵⁹ CHAPTER FIVE SWEET ENDINGS WITH MEAD & MORE

¹⁹¹ CONVERSION TABLE FOR COOKING

¹⁹² ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

¹⁹³ PICTURE CREDITS

¹⁹⁵ NOTES

²⁰⁷ BIBLIOGRAPHY

²¹⁹ INDEX

*For my father John Clarke, who would have made
one of the greatest archaeologists of our time, had he
been given the opportunity.*

INTRODUCTION

I wanted to begin this book with a quick examination of what is meant by ‘Anglo-Saxon’, a phrase which has become loaded with contemporary interpretations in recent years, most controversially as a way of defining white supremacy.

In its simplest, historic terms, the phrase Anglo-Saxon seems to have first emerged around the eighth century, when George, Bishop of Ostia, sent a missive back to the Pope after a visit to England that he had been to *Angul Saxnia*.¹

Alfred the Great styled himself ‘King of the Anglo-Saxons’, as did subsequent kings. This was not a phrase that extolled ethnic superiority, in an early medieval world which was hugely diverse in England at that time – Scandinavian, Germanic, French, Flemish, lingering Celtic, Romano – a society influenced by Mediterranean culture, with a reputation that by the tenth century was defined as a land ‘of many different languages and customs’.²

There has to be some way of identifying this extraordinary period, other than christening it the early medieval era, or worse still the ‘dark ages’. When I ask people what they think ‘medieval’ means to them, the standard reply is often to mention Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. When I ask what ‘early medieval’ is, there is usually a pause for thought and some vague finger waving in the direction of 1066. Mention Anglo-Saxons and most people immediately respond with the Viking invasion, or ask ‘Is that like *Game of Thrones*?’. They would of course be partially

right. In the main, people find it difficult remembering which period of history equates with what event. But they appreciate that the Anglo-Saxon era is a specific time, which is different to that of 'medievalism'. Much the same as most people would be able to determine that the Victorian age equates with the nineteenth century, in accordance with the reign of Queen Victoria, and that the Georgian age was during the reign of the four King Georges – incidentally some of the most controversial periods in British history.

Should we also be looking to eradicate the names of kings and queens who are most associated with exploitation, imperialism, and slavery? Schoolchildren are still taught Anglo-Saxon history as part of the National Curriculum, great institutions of learning in Britain, including the National Trust, English Heritage, the Ashmolean, the Museum of London, National Museums Liverpool, the British Museum, and far too many others to mention, not to mention major relevant universities, castles, churches, archaeological sites, and library, archive, and manuscript categories, all use the phrase to determine their collections and areas of study. It is a period of distinction, and that is why this book has adopted the phrase.

In a nutshell, Anglo-Saxon Britain after the fourth century consisted of post-Roman settlements of Britons and migrant communities, including large groups of Danish seafarers from across the North Sea. Kent was one of the fastest growing settlements, followed by East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia (the Midlands) and Wessex (Wiltshire, Hampshire, Dorset, Berkshire, Somerset). Despite the departure of the Vikings from York in the mid 900s which led to the continuing rise of the ruling Saxon (Wessex) dynasty in England at this time, further Viking raids took place in the tenth and eleventh centuries, before the Normans invaded and occupied England in 1066. It is also clear that England's relationship with the Franks was a complex political one, particularly in the earlier part of this era. Essentially, England was continuously raided, usurped, at war and fighting for control of its territories for centuries.

Angles were one tribe of invaders from Denmark, whereas Saxons

represented another tribe of Germanic people from the same geographical area. Hence the merging of Angles and Saxons in England. Vikings were also Germanic, but they were aggressive warriors, pagan and tribal. Saxons were largely peace-keeping and Christian, and came along much earlier than the Vikings. This book maintains a holistic approach to the generic Anglo-Saxon period, as one that is inclusive of Viking settlers, the two being entwined.

So, you may ask, who were Britain's indigenous inhabitants before this small island got pulled apart? It was first occupied by the Celts, an ancient tribe of people from Central and Northern Europe who originally settled in Britain before they suffered the fate of being killed, evicted, or integrated into Roman society, following the Roman occupation. Many Celts were forced to move into Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, the North and across to France. There probably would have been few left in England by the time of the great Scandinavian and Germanic invasions. It is important to clarify that the British Isles were probably not at any one time just populated by an isolated community of 'British' people. Stone Age populations in Britain and Ireland could very easily have been networking with the rest of Europe. There is evidence of seafaring during this period and nothing to say that trade wasn't being conducted and knowledge exchanged. Orkney, off the north coast of Scotland, yields evidence of a settlement there during the late Stone Age. To achieve this, settlers would have had to cross an almost impossibly treacherous stretch of water.³ Communities moved and migrated around wherever the necessary resources they needed could be accessed.

Many people living in Anglo-Saxon England would have worked the land. A significant percentage of the population were also slaves; the rest were freemen who fell into several categories, with some working their own land, and others who worked for the lord or thane. Ultimately everyone was beholden to royalty and the King was advised by his handful of law enforcing earls. Although it is important to emphasise here that early Anglo-Saxon 'kings' were more akin to tribal chiefs, rather than heads of state.⁴ Despite Anglo-Saxons not being the most

prolific of castle builders, some strongholds were constructed during this time that served as places where royalty and leaders resided, servicing and protecting the country's separate kingdoms prior to unification. A number of these were originally Roman defence systems, which were re-occupied by Saxons. Examples include Bamburgh Castle in Northumbria, Cheddar Palace in Somerset, Daws Castle, Somerset, Yeavinger (some 15 miles west of Bamburgh), Goltho, Lincolnshire and Porchester Castle, Fareham, although the latter may well have functioned more as a 'burh' or 'burg', a fortified settlement or fortification. Former Anglo-Saxon manor houses and other fortified settlements in England are evident at Sulgrave (Northamptonshire), Middleton Mount (Norfolk), Gainsborough Castle (Lincolnshire – now the present day Old Hall), Halton (Lancashire), Ewyas Harold Castle and Hereford Castle (Herefordshire), Richard's Castle (Shropshire/Herefordshire), Warblington Castle, Hampshire, Clavering Castle, Essex, Stansted Mountfitchet Castle, Driffeld Castle, Yorkshire, Wareham Castle, Dorset, Bampton Castle, Devon, Loddiswell, Devon, Duffield Castle, Derby, Hope, Derbyshire, Sedbergh Castle, Cumbria, Warrington, Cheshire, Castle Camps, Cambridgeshire, Flitwick Castle, Bedfordshire, Thurleigh Castle, Bedfordshire and Tilsworth Castle, Bedfordshire and sites across London (Lundenwic). There are countless other cemetery, burial, ship, earthwork, church, and monastery sites littered throughout the country, along with significant sites of interest like York, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, West Stow village, Snape cemetery, Suffolk, Canterbury-St Martin's, Mucking and Prittlewell Essex, Walkington, Yorkshire and the village of Hammerwich, Staffordshire.

Ireland wasn't penetrated by the Saxons in the same way as England, although there was a significant raid by the kingdom of Northumbria in the seventh century. It was the Normans who finally conquered the country. The Anglo-Saxon kingdom known as Bernicia included parts of southern Scotland, yielding a scattering of Anglo-Saxon finds, including timber halls and burial sites at Doonhill, and a possible royal hall and other mortared buildings in Dunbar. There was less contact between the Welsh and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.⁵ In Wales, the mighty Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke, which separated England from Wales,

remain physical reminders of the border between the two. The only Anglo-Saxon settlement to have been identified in South Wales at the time of writing is in Monmouth, which may have functioned as a burh.⁶

'Burhs' – not to be confused with burghs, which referred to a chartered town or borough – were designed to protect whole communities, a kind of national defence of fortified towns, including Lydford, Bridport, Oxford, Winchester and so on. A list of all these Anglo-Saxon burhs can be found in a collation of documents known as the Burghal Hidage which was probably compiled around 914. The documents also stipulate the number of hides belonging to each burh. Essentially, a hide was used to assess the amount of tax and food rents due in any one area. There were as many as 1500 hides belonging to Chichester alone, which is an indicator of how significant this system was.⁷

A figure ranging from anywhere between ten and thirty per cent has been quoted in terms of the number of slaves living in England at this time. Life was harsh for these people, with glimmers of their tragic circumstances appearing fleetingly in texts such as Ælfric's *Colloquy*, and the chronicles of William of Malmesbury, the latter noting:

[They] would buy up people from all over England and sell them off to Ireland in the hope of profit, and put up for sale maidservants after toying with them in bed and making them pregnant. You would have groaned to see the files of the wretches of people roped together, young persons of both sexes whose beautiful appearance and youthful innocence might move barbarians to pity, being put up for sale every day.⁸

On reading the laws of Ine, King of Wessex from 689 to 726, you could be convinced that early Anglo-Saxon England was a very chaotic place indeed. The extensive list of laws and punishments detailed by Ine mirrors a society greatly afflicted by crime. There were fugitives, bands of thieves, abandoned children and animals roaming the countryside.⁹ The laws to combat crime can equally be interpreted as cautious; for example a stranger was expected to shout out or blow their horn if

they did not want to be mistaken for a thief – and you certainly didn't want that, as the punishment for being caught in the act of thieving was death, unless you could afford to pay your victim compensation. Tradesmen were regarded with suspicion, acts of revenge were dragged into court and foreigners were distrusted. On the other hand, single mothers were provided with benefits amounting to six shillings a year, a cow every summer and an ox every winter.¹⁰

Was this a barbarous country or rather a vigilant one, concerned with the safety and welfare of its communities?

Both Christianity and Paganism were practiced in England by the seventh century. Two centuries later, the country was divided into Northern Danelaw, Wessex, or the kingdom of the West Saxons in the south and the kingdom of Mercia in the Midlands. What followed was a series of Danish kings who united England before the Norman king, William the Conqueror, defeated Harold II in 1066. The once predominant language of Latin, bestowed on Britain by the Romans, morphed into an amalgamation of other cultures, as Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (another powerful Nordic tribe) communed together, which would have made for a confusing, rich mix of vocabulary during this time. The largest collection of Anglo-Saxon books belonged to the ecclesiastical communities, held in monasteries and cathedrals. This was not a time of widespread literacy and learning, which was reserved for the higher echelons of society, and the trivialities of food were not broadly documented, other than in a legal or civil capacity. Most of our information on the eating habits of early English communities stems from monastic records, or medicinal tomes. Food was grown, alcohol brewed and herb gardens lovingly cultivated for medicinal and culinary purposes. Fasting was a significant aspect of monastic life. Bishop Cedd, who resided in a monastery given to him by King Ethelwald in the seventh century, ate the following daily throughout Lent: a small piece of bread, one egg and a little milk and water, which wasn't consumed until the evening. Egbert, also a holy man of the seventh century, is recorded by Bede as consuming even less during Lent, surviving on one meal a day consisting of bread and 'thin milk'.¹¹

The noted historian William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1100s, scripted a beautiful description of the monastery at Thorney, in Cambridgeshire, which was rebuilt as an abbey during Norman rule, destroyed during the dissolution, and rebuilt as the church of St Mary and St Botolph. You can almost taste the fruit on the trees and the grapes in the vineyard:

It is the image of paradise, and its loveliness gives an advance idea of heaven itself. For all the swamps surrounding it, it supports an abundance of trees, whose tall smooth trunks strain towards the stars. The flat countryside catches the eye with its green carpet of grass; those who hurry across the plain meet nothing that offends. No part of the land, however tiny, is uncultivated. In one place you come across tall fruit trees, in another fields bordered with vines, which creep along the earth or climb high on their props. Nature and art are in competition: what the one forgets the other brings forth [...]. A vast solitude allows the monks a quiet life: the more limited their glimpses of mortal men, the more tenaciously they cleave to things heavenly.¹²

Old English medical texts, or 'leechbooks' as they were known, such as *Bald's Leechbook*, and the collations of manuscripts subsequently compiled by the Victorian scholar Oswald Cockayne, provide excellent primary sources of research into Anglo-Saxon remedies and recipes, how foods were combined, basic cooking techniques, and the types of ingredients that were available at the time. In *Bald's Leechbook*, for example, the following ingredients are prescribed in a variety of recipes intended to cure different ailments or energise the body:

In *Leechbook III*, the four most frequently prescribed substances were water (17 times), milk (21), ale (27) and butter (28). In Book I of *Bald's Leechbook* and in *Leechbook III*, the following plants or plant products appear a total of twelve or more times; Ivy (12), coriander (12), smallage (13), pennyroyal (15), hindheal (16), centaury (18), radish (20), barley (20), oat (20), carline thistle (20), attorlothe (corydalis/fumitory) (21), cockle (21), celandine (22),

yarrow (27), horehound (30), onions and garlic (31), fennel (31), rue (33), lupin (34), plantain (35), elecampane (36), pepper (37), oil (38), wormwood (40), vinegar (45), bishopswort (46), betony (61), wine (66), ale (83), honey (92). In the same collections the most frequently used animal products were: urines of goat, cattle, hound, child (8 in all), dungs of dove, goat, sheep, horse, cattle, swine, human (20 in all), galls of crab, salmon, cattle, goat, swine, bear, hare (30 in all), eggs (28 in all), milks of goat, sheep, cow, human (42 in all), fats of sheep, cattle, goat, swine, horse, bear, fish, hen, goose, deer (49 in all), butter (94). Pigeon, starling and swallow supplied a few medicines, as did dung beetles, mealworms, ants, snails and earthworms.¹³

J. Falcand de Luca is thought to have been the first officially recorded apothecary granted permission to sell medicines in England in 1357. There were clearly earlier traders as the archives mention shops like that of Master Otto of Germany, 'a physician of repute', who sold medicinal compounds from his shop in York in 1292.¹⁴

Apothecaries emerged from the Guild of Pepperers, a company of merchant traders who imported a range of medicinal wares and culinary spices, first mentioned around the twelfth century, but with a legacy greater than that. By the fourteenth century the rather long-winded fraternity known as the Pepperers or Easterlings of Sopers Lane, and the Spicers of the Ward of Chepe formed. They conducted their business across shops and stalls selling spices, medicinal drugs and perfumes. Many of these men were Italian or German in origin. By 1428, this rich mix of pepperers, spicers and apothecaries had merged into the Company of Grocers, officially granted charter by King Henry VI.¹⁵ The foundations of trading spice and luxury goods started much earlier, and this book aims to outline the impact of overseas relations in England during the Anglo-Saxon era.

Kitchens as we know them did not really exist in Anglo-Saxon times. Cooking was usually outdoors or in the centre of the main room of the house, with a firepit and a cauldron. There would undoubtedly have

been designated places for cooking in monasteries or houses of nobility, but these were unlikely to have been anything like the later medieval kitchens that we are most familiar with in terms of early cooking methods and techniques. There was no running water, no knowledge of germ theory or basic hygiene. Disease was rife and sustaining food and water supplies was a daily responsibility. Generally, houses were modest, defenceless, low and dark, constructed of timber with roofs of straw.

Seven firepits, rectangular in shape, were excavated in Gravesend, Kent. Two of these were dated at anywhere between 485-530 and it has been determined that they were originally used for smoking large quantities of meat, including cod fish and pork. Other Anglo-Saxon pits such as the one discovered in Bishopstone, measuring one and a half metres across, contained the remains of an almost complete pot, with large quantities of animal bone. A firepit at Nettleton Top (Lincolnshire) was discovered, it was shallow and oblong in shape and lined with many small pieces of ironstone, coloured from the heat, and at Eye Kettleby, Leicestershire, over sixty pits were excavated, with twelve of these being identified as cooking facilities.¹⁶

The Anglo-Normans sometimes 'cooked' food in clay pots submerged in quick lime. This method is outlined by Constance Hieatt and Robin Jones in their translation of two Anglo-Norman culinary texts, representative of some of the earliest English recipes:

Take a small earthenware pot, with an earthenware lid which must be as wide as the pot; then take another pot of the same earthenware, with a lid like that of the first; this pot is to be deeper than the first by five fingers, and wider in circumference by three; then take pork and hens and cut into fair-sized pieces, and take fine spices and add them, and salt; take the small pot with the meat in it and place it upright in the large pot; cover it with the lid and stop it with moist clayey earth, so that nothing may escape; then take unslaked lime, and fill the larger pot with water, ensuring that no water enters the smaller pot; let it stand for the time it takes to walk between five and seven leagues, and

then open your pots, and you will find your food indeed cooked.¹⁷

Basically, by mixing quicklime with water, in between the two pots, a chemical reaction occurred, which was considerable enough to heat the food.

The Romans used lime-based mortars a great deal, for all manner of building projects. I have read that some high-status buildings were whitewashed in lime during the Anglo-Saxon period and quicklime was also used in the production of leather to loosen the hair on animal hides, but other than that its use is not really documented. That doesn't mean to say that this cooking technique was not used by some Anglo-Saxon communities and perhaps we shouldn't rule it out. Certainly, the Anglo-Saxon leechdoms – medical formulas or remedies – as noted by Cockayne, contain a treatment to cure 'every wound' that incorporates quicklime:

[...] collect cow dung, cow stale, work up a large kettle full into a batter as a man worketh soap, then take appletree rind, and ash rind, and withy rind, sloethorn rind, and myrtle rind, and elm rind, and holly rind, and withy rind, and the rind of a young oak, sallow rind, put them all in a mickle kettle, pour the batter upon them, boil very long then remove the rinds, boil the batter so that it be thick, put it ever into a less kettle as it growth less, pour it, when it is thick enough, into a vessel, heat then a calcareous stone thoroughly, and collect some soot, and sift it through a cloth with the quicklime also into the batter, smear the wound therewith.¹⁸

Writing in the 1100s, the theologian, Hugh of Saint Victor was one of the most prolific authors of his age. His origins were either Flemish or Saxon, and born as he was towards the end of the eleventh century his experiences contribute to the general early medieval discourse on the food and drink of Northern and Western Europe. His *Didascalicon*, which was intended to serve as a compendium of knowledge for his theological students, provides the following details:

Of meats, some are roasted, others fried, others boiled, some fresh,

some salted. Some are called loins, flitches also or sides, haunches or hams, grease, lard, fat. The varieties of meat dishes are likewise numerous – Italian sausage, minced meat, patties, Galatian tarts, and all other such things that a very prince of cooks has been able to concoct. Porridges contain milk, colostrum, butter, cheese, whey. And who can enumerate the names of vegetables and fruits? Of seasonings some are hot, some cold, some bitter, some sweet, some dry, some moist. Of drink, some is merely that: it moistens without nourishing, like water; other is both drink and food, for it both moistens and nourishes, like wine. Of the nutritious drinks, furthermore, some are naturally so, like wine or any other liquor, others accidentally so, like beer and various kinds of mead.¹⁹

Cooking equipment during the Anglo-Saxon era was basic, with large pots for boiling, hooks and roasting spits, the occasional oven, frying pans and griddles. Eating utensils consisted of spoons and knives.

The eleventh-century literary manuscript known as *Gerefa* was intended to provide advice to a reeve, or local official, on the efficient running of a lord's farm. Offering guidance on the management of an estate's labourers, it also includes lists of tools and implements required for the lord's farmstead. The contents of the kitchen were minimal and included:

Small cauldron, leaden vessel, large cauldron, ladle, pans, earthenware pot, grid iron, dishes, scoop.²⁰

Wealthier Saxons did have some vessels made of glass, and they imported wine, luxury oils and spices such as pepper, ginger, and cinnamon. A cone shaped glass beaker was unearthed in Mitcham, London, dating somewhere in the region of the fifth to early sixth century and is thought to have been imported from France, Germany, or Belgium.²¹ In addition, seventh century deep blue glass beakers were also found on-site at an Anglo-Saxon royal burial chamber in Prittlewell, Essex.²²

Ipswich ware, including items like jars and pitchers, was one of the most popular types of pottery manufactured in Anglo-Saxon times, produced

in large kilns and on wheels in Ipswich, Suffolk, from the eighth century onwards. It had a wide distribution and has been found on sites in London, York, Kent, Beverley and Flixborough, to name just a few.²³

During the later Anglo-Saxon period kitchens started to evolve but were limited to the houses of the elite. They were also separate buildings often built next to the main hall. One such kitchen at Sulgrave in Northamptonshire was connected to the hall via an antechamber, complete with built-in drainage to enable dirty water to flow out, in contrast to many of our preconceived ideas of the unsanitary conditions of the period.²⁴

We have no knowledge of whether cooks were professionally trained or how recipes were communicated. I once heard the Swedish chef Magnus Nilsson talking about the culture of recipes in Scandinavia and how they had always been passed down orally from generation to generation. Before literacy, this would have been understandable, but it seems to have been a tradition which endured. We do know from Ælfric's *Colloquy* that cooks existed as a profession by the eleventh century:

The Cook says: If you expel me from your society, you'll eat your vegetables raw and your meat uncooked; and you can't even have a good broth without my art [...]. If you drive me out [...] then you'll all be servants, and none of you will be lord. And without my craft you still won't be able to eat.²⁵

What this tells us is that although many citizens of later Anglo-Saxon society would have been capable of understanding basic cooking skills, royalty and nobility would still have needed to employ competent cooks.

The Domesday Book is littered with cooks, and all of them are male names, suggesting this was not initially a position for women. In Salmonsbury, Gloucestershire, we learn that Humphry the cook had one plough and four smallholdings, while Gilbert, a cook from Northamptonshire, had a mill, 28 acres of land and six ploughs.²⁶

Ælfstan is the monastic cook mentioned in the *Life of St Æthelwold*

written by Wulfstan, a tenth-century monk and priest from Winchester, who was also a pupil of Æthelwold. Ælfstan's chores included 'cooking meat every day and serving it painstakingly to the workmen, lighting the fire, fetching water, and keeping the pans clean'.²⁷

Ælfstan also shows his obedience to Æthelwold by placing his hand in a boiling pot to pull out a morsel of food. As if martyred, his arm remained uninjured.

A lot of food was boiled in Anglo-Saxon times, as with Ælfstan's cooking, but it was also roasted and broiled. One term for this was *ge-bréðan*,²⁸ another was *bræding*, while *ge-hierstan* was typically associated with the act of frying.²⁹

Rent during the Anglo-Saxon era was often paid in food and feudal contracts were drafted to ensure the terms of agreement between the lord of the manor and his labouring peasant tenants. There are numerous documents that allude to this. An example of this practice from the village of Hurstbourne in Hampshire is included here:

First from every hide [they must render] 40 pence at the autumnal equinox, and 6 church *mittan* of ale and 3 sesters of wheat for bread, and [they must] plough 3 acres in their own time and sow them with their own seed and bring it to the barn in their own time, and [give] 3 pounds of barley as rent, and [mow] half an acre of meadow as rent in their own time, and make it into a rick, and [supply] 4 fothers of split wood as rent, made into a stack in their own time, and [supply] 16 poles of fencing as rent, likewise in their own time, and at Easter [they shall give] two ewes with two lambs – and we [reckon] two young sheep to a full-grown sheep – and they must wash the sheep and shear them in their own time, and work as they are bidden every week except three – one at windwinter, the second at Easter, the third at the Rogation days.³⁰

Food was also fundamental to customs surrounding death – both in relation to the feasting that took place at the time of burial, as well as

the items of food and cooking utensils that were buried alongside the dead. A fragment of a will discovered in Bury St Edmunds revealed the monetary costs bequeathed by one person to cater for this custom:

[...] 5 ores for the first funeral feast for malt and for fuel and 42 pence for bread and 17 pence for a pig and 2 ores [for] a bullock and 1 ore [for] three bucks a 8 pence [for] a cheese and 3 pence for fish and 4 pence for milk.

And 11 ½ ores for the second funeral feast [...]³¹

Anglo-Saxon graves often contained pots for food and cooking, along with domestic utensils, examples of which have been unearthed at the Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Girton College Cambridge, Buckland in Dover and Castledyke South, Barton-Humber, to name just a few. These were pagan offerings to the gods, which continued after England's conversion to Christianity. Foodstuffs discovered in burial sites, along with other evidence including purpose-built structures, pits and burnt stones erected in cemeteries, also indicate the presence of culinary funeral rituals. A final shared meal with the dead.³²

Communal feast halls were central to Anglo-Saxon society in England. Excavations at Yeavinger and Cheddar have revealed the foundations of halls which were tens of feet long and wide, with high ceilings. Although Sutton Hoo offers a ship opposed to a hall, the numerous trappings discovered there demonstrating a kingly lifestyle, including drinking cups, horns and even a harp, are all an affirmation of significant on-site feasting.³³ Written within the context of sixth-century pagan Scandinavia, the epic poem *Beowulf* paints a picture of feast hall life. Hrothgar, king of the Danes is plagued by an angry lake monster named Grendel who sets about terrorising the king's men, in response to all the noise generated by the merriment conducted in the king's mead hall, known as 'Heorot'. A young and cocky Swedish prince, Beowulf, challenges Grendel and is victorious. The monster's mother returns to the mead hall and causes more destruction in revenge for her son's death. Beowulf battles with her in a cave at the bottom of the lake and again is triumphant. There is much celebrating before Beowulf returns to his

own kingdom, eventually succeeding his father to the throne. Towards the end of his life Beowulf engages in a bloody battle with a dragon, a fight which finds him deserted by his own men, with the exception of young Wiglaf. They defeat the dragon together, but Beowulf is mortally wounded and names Wiglaf his successor. The story ends surrounded by the uncertain future of Beowulf's kingdom. It is a story of heroism, good triumphing over evil, but with ominous undertones.

Although there are no direct references to food in *Beowulf*, much has been read into the symbolic nature of the mead hall itself, Heorot, a word which translates as deer or stag. It is a place of nobility, for celebrating communally, eating, and drinking together. We can gain some potential knowledge about Anglo-Saxon etiquette in *Beowulf* through the cup-bearer, whose job is specifically to serve alcohol in a formal way to each member of the party, acknowledging both status and the importance of welcoming guests. The *Beowulf* poet, who is anonymous, refers to the 'mead-benches', these were literally long seats where people were seated to drink. Stephen Pollington has written at length about the notion of 'togetherness, friendship, hospitality, fellowship, brightness and warmth' within the context of the mead hall as a building for people to unite in communal drinking and eating. A place of sanctuary in a dark and harsh world fuelled with battles.³⁴

Entertainment was also a significant part of the feasting process in Anglo-Saxon times. *Beowulf* introduces us to the *scop*, an early medieval name for a poet and a minstrel who sings the story of Finn and Hnæf during the banquet.³⁵

Both monastic and secular communities ate communally. Most people outside the church lived in villages, although there were some commercially active new towns. Rural villages were a mix of farmsteads and hamlets, self-sufficient communities, where people grew their own produce, made their own clothes and tools. Village or farmstead communities also had a hall or halls for meeting, discussing business, undertaking religious ceremonies, and eating. These differed from the royal halls, which would have been much larger and decorative.

The site of one of the most distinctive of these halls can be found in Northumberland at Yeavering, first recorded by Bede in the eighth century as a royal villa and now part of the Gefrin Trust. The Heritage Gateway website describes the Great Hall at Yeavering as:

Rectangular in plan, [it] was of panelled timber and trench construction with partitions at either end creating long and narrow ante-chambers. Doors were made in each of the four walls and were connected by axial passages which divided raised timber floors supported by piles. A group of post-holes, trapezoidal in shape, situated in the centre of the building, and resembling the dias of the assembly structure, suggests the possibility that a chair or throne, flanked by tall posts, stood in the main passage, close to an open area which was likely to have contained a hearth. Adjoining the eastern end of this building were two connected palisaded enclosures which were thought to be for horses and men at arms. Tiny bone fragments and pottery found in the fill of the major post-holes along with the buildings' apparent structure, suggest that this building was feasting hall and throne room.³⁶

There are a number of manuscripts from the Anglo-Saxon period that focus on early medieval law and penance, including works like the *Scriftboc*, the *Canons of Theodore* and the *Old English Penitential*. Unsurprisingly, fasting and the denial of certain foods were popular punishments. Like this following translation from the *Scriftboc*:

If a man slays another in [an act of] *mord* [homicide] and with a wrathful mind and with concealment, let him fast four years; some wish for seven.³⁷

Saint Chrodegang, the Bishop of Metz, is understood to have written the earliest surviving set of rules for canons in the mid-eighth century and his writings greatly influenced the European early medieval church.

Most monasteries adhered to strict rules about eating and drinking, with many following the customs of Saint Benedict. As there were so

many days of abstinence, these rules varied from month to month. Generally, a monk was allocated one pound of bread a day, a dish of pulses or porridge, a portion of meat or cheese if fasting.³⁸

Chrodegang stipulated the following allowance of food and drink, which provides us with a good insight into eighth-century monastic eating habits:

Whether the clergy eat once or twice in the day, they should receive from the least to the greatest, four pounds of bread. When they eat twice in the day they should have lunch at midday, with one portion of meat between two, and one other dish; if there be no other such dishes, they should have two helpings of meat. At supper they should either have one helping of meat between two, or some other dish. At times when they follow a Lenten regime, at midday they should have a portion of cheese between two clerics, and some other dish; if fish are available, or beans, or anything else, a third dish should be added. At supper they should have another dish between two of them, and a portion of cheese. If God grants them more, they should be grateful for it. On days when there is but a single meal, they should have one dish between two, and a portion of cheese and a serving of beans or other pulse. And if it happens that there be no acorns or beechmast that year, and they have not the means to make up the ration of meat, the bishop, or whoever represents him, should see to it that they have some compensation either of Lenten fare or anything else, whatever God makes possible.

If the region produces wine, each one should receive five pints of wine every day, unless there be a bad season which makes this impossible. If the full amount of wine cannot be produced, they should have three pints of wine, and three of beer, and beware of drunkenness. If there is even less wine available, and the bishop or his representative is unable to make up the ration, he should provide as much as he can, and console them with beer. From those who abstain from wine, the bishop or his representative should make sure that they have as much beer as they should have had wine.³⁹

Aside from the fierce warnings against the evils of alcohol, what is most interesting about this passage is the suggestion that both acorns and beech nuts (beechmast) were used as food fillers. Monastery food had a reputation for being modest and simple. There is no mention of how these nuts were prepared. Perhaps they were ground down and made into broths, or mixed with something else and fried as a solid cake. Anne Hagen notes that acorns were typically bulk famine foods and were likely to have been mixed together with cereal flour and other pulses.⁴⁰

A less fire and brimstone approach to the rules of cooking in monastic environments comes from the Italian Saint Benedict, a fifth/sixth century saint, whose precepts were adopted widely by the European Christian church. He recommended that all members of the clergy take it in turns to cook for one another, and that on Saturdays, whoever was cooking should be tasked with sweeping the kitchen, washing the towels that were used to wash the hands and feet of the rest of the clergy, and clean and return all the kitchen utensils to the procurator (the monk in charge), to hand over to the next cook the following week. Weekly cooks were also instructed to eat their own portions of bread and wine before serving the others, so that they wouldn't get distracted from their duties.⁴¹

When approaching the research for this book to determine the diets of Anglo-Saxon communities, I felt it was essential to investigate what people were eating in the centuries immediately before, as well as immediately after. Where records are sparse during the Anglo-Saxon era, the Romans left a wealth of written accounts, including plenty of evidence relating to food and how it was prepared. Some of these recipes must have been handed down, evolved, or morphed into other creations. The Normans appear to have influenced the existing English diet tremendously after 1066, but that could just be because more documentation exists from this time. It is difficult to determine exactly what culinary legacy the Romans left behind, particularly as the majority of everyday folk would not have indulged in the likes of stuffed dormice and roasted pheasant, and the record books were written by and for the literate nobility.

We know that the Romans did not consume a great deal of beef, whereas raising cattle was key to many Anglo-Saxon farmers. The Romans were however pioneers of cheese-making, something which definitely transferred to the next generation of England's occupants. The Romans also cultivated a whole new range of herbs, fruit trees and vegetables, which greatly diversified the overall diet of the British Isles. Nor should we underestimate the impact of the Middle East on English cuisine and all those powerful culinary influences that the English Crusaders brought back with them from the many religious conflicts throughout the Holy Land, as early as the 1000s. There is also evidence to suggest these influences were potentially much earlier and that trade routes throughout the Mediterranean were widespread. The power of the Frankish presence in Anglo-Saxon England is also often neglected and it is important to maintain a flexible approach when assessing the social and cultural environment of England at this time.

A wide sphere of primary and secondary sources is needed to gather an understanding of the Anglo-Saxon culinary narrative, from the musings of clerics and nobility, to Norse mythology and early medieval foreign affairs. As Britain became such a rich mix of new cultures, it is inevitable that this would have influenced everything from the social framework of the country to its agriculture, trade, lifestyles, and customs.

The dynamics of class, economies and religion are entwined in the overall culture of eating and drinking, and despite the lack of adequate documentation relating to food, cooking, and its consumption during the Anglo-Saxon era, it is possible to build a speculative picture using a broad scope of approaches to the research. For example, class was a defining element of what people would have eaten and drunk, as was access to education. Undeniably the more literate and wealthier you were, the greater access you would have had to diverse foodstuffs. The old Norse poem *Rígsþula* is illustrative of this, telling a story which would have been well known throughout Scandinavia. The god named Ríg visits three houses, each indicative of a different social class. In the first house Ríg receives coarse bread and broth, in the next boiled veal, and finally the last house has a table adorned with fancy linens

and silverware from which Rig is served fine white bread, wine and succulent meats and roasted birds.⁴²

Archaeological evidence is also critical to the narrative. New Anglo-Saxon discoveries are being made every year, including that of an eighth-century monastery in Cookham, Berkshire, thought to be lost and once ruled by Queen Cynethryth, the widow of the mighty King Offa of Mercia. Here, remains of food and cooking were unearthed in 2021. In this same year, burnt features found across several Anglo-Saxon settlements in the east of England, revealed degraded animal fat attributed to cattle, sheep, or goats. Finds which suggest large joints of these types of animals were roasted in pits. Excavations in Oxford's Anglo-Saxon city centre quarter in 2019 revealed charred plant remains of wheat and hulled barley, along with smaller quantities of oats and rye. Evidence of beef, mutton and pork consumption, oysters and freshwater fish, as well as chickens, suggest this community ate well. At the time of writing, the site at Rendlesham, Suffolk is now considered to be the largest and richest Anglo-Saxon settlement in the country, covering some 50 hectares of land. Research is ongoing, with major community archaeology surveys planned over the next few years. Most recently, Yeavering in Northumberland has gained media attention with its bid to interpret more of its large-scale site in the autumn of 2022, including an Anglo-Saxon great hall and seventh century royal summer palace.

In this book I have attempted to develop some of my own dishes inspired by the ingredients available to early medieval society, in addition to including some existing and historical recipes. My intention is to create an understanding of the food and drink itself, as well as providing inspiration for the reader to engage directly with this knowledge. Given the limits of the information available all that anyone can really do is assume what might have been, based on a wide field of supporting evidence. One thing however is certain. Anglo-Saxon Britain was not a 'Dark Age', nor were its people barbarians.

CHAPTER ONE

MEAT, SEAFOOD & ALL THE FISH

In the eighth century the Venerable Bede wrote that 'Britain is rich in grain and trees, and is well adapted for feeding cattle and beasts of burden. It also [...] has plenty of land and water fowl of divers sorts.'¹ While in the early twelfth century William of Malmesbury noted that in Cambridgeshire eels and 'water birds' were so bounteous that 'for a single penny, five men or more cannot merely ward off hunger with these two kinds of food: they can eat their fill'.²

The Anglo-Saxon culinary landscape assuredly sounds as if it was rich and varied. Certainly evidence of the presence of animals across the British Isles in early history is clear from the Old English names still in use today, such as Brockholes, *brocs* being badger holes; Buckingham, derived from *bucca* or goats, Swindone (swine) or Swindon, meaning pig hill; Oxford or Oxenford being towns close to a shallow river where oxen would cross; Woolwich was a wool producing region; and places such as Shipley and Shipton would once have been clearings for sheep pastures. Place and street names and their relationship to history are all around us.

Some scholars of the period intimate that Anglo-Saxon communities were largely vegetarian, but from the archaeological studies I have read there is plenty of evidence to suggest that meat played a significant role in diets generally. Isotope studies, including chemical elements like carbon were obtained from the bones unearthed at an early Anglo-Saxon site in Berinsfield, Oxfordshire. The results revealed that 'every individual tested consumed a significant amount of animal protein on a regular basis'. This

signifies that for this particular group of people, which ranged in status from wealthy to poor, meat was consumed habitually.³

Certainly by the later Saxon period, with the evolution of new agricultural practices and the rise of markets and urban sites, meat became a much more dominant economic factor in society.⁴ Consumption of meat and fish was also dependent on the surrounding environment, in terms of adequate soil or pasture land and the accessibility of nearby rivers, not to mention mother nature, as this extract from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* illustrates. The winter of 1046, just after Candlemas was so bad,

[...] with frost and with snow, and with all kinds of tempestuous weather, so that there was no man then alive who could remember so severe a winter as this was, as well through mortality of men, as murrain [distemper or infectious disease] of cattle; even birds and fishes perished through the great cold and famine.⁵

Famine was common in Anglo-Saxon Britain. This was a time of unsophisticated transport networks, and food was produced on a hand to mouth basis. There was no knowledge of how to counteract the effects of bad weather or treat disease, so crop failures and the loss of animals were standard. Such events were also received with suspicion, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records:

This year, on a moonlight night after Christmas, during the first sleep, the northern half of the heaven was, as it were, a burning fire; so that all who saw it were more afeared than ever they were before; this happened on the 3rd before the Ides of January. The same year there was so great a pestilence amongst animals over all England, as had not been in the memory of man; it chiefly fell on cattle and on swine, so that in the town where ten or twelve ploughs had been going, not one remained, and the man, who had possessed two or three hundred swine, had not one left him. After this the hens died; and flesh-meat became scarce, and cheese and butter.⁶

Food shortages must have impacted hugely on poorer communities in early medieval England, at a time when despite the burgeoning towns, most homesteads were rural and isolated. If you were inland it may have been even harsher, with little access to marine life, unless nearby rivers offered some sustenance. Fish had to be caught, and if you had baskets or nets, or better still hooks, you may have been fortuitous. Many Anglo-Saxons did have this type of tackle, but there would have been a strong reliance on preserved foods that were pickled or salted to sustain on-going appetites. In a time before refrigeration or adequate storage, a hook in a cooler part of your basic hut was one of the few options when it came to preserving whole joints of meat. Mortality levels were higher generally in the early medieval period and childhood was a short process. Young boys would be brought up to prepare for battle, while learning how to farm and garden, hunt, fish, maintain the land, carry out repairs and perform all the hard physical duties within the community. The work of girls was more domestic: keeping the home, mending clothes, learning crafts and making cheese. If one aspect of everyday life failed, like crops or the meat supply, it could destroy the balance of any small settlement. Life must have been unpredictable and harsh for many.

Meat

One of the earliest English cookery books, which reads more like a housekeeper's teaching manual, was compiled by the theologian and writer, Alexander Neckam of St Albans, who was also the son of Richard I's wet nurse. Written around the year 1190 in Latin and Norman French, Neckam's description of a mansion house included a private courtyard or poultry-yard which housed capons, cocks, hens, geese, ducks and peacocks for domestic consumption.⁷

Some four hundred years earlier, it is clear that rich foods were just as important to the nobility. Feasting was an essential part of the Anglo-Saxon military and sovereign culture, as the list of food required for just one night's stay during King Offa's travels around England in the eighth century testifies, including over 40 casks of ale, 10 jars of honey, 300 loaves, 2 oxen, 10 geese, 20 hens, 10 cheeses, 100 eels, 5 salmon and a whole cask of butter.⁸ Offa ruled the kingdom of Mercia as a Christian king and his

legacy is almost as dazzling as that of King Alfred the Great. The imposing dyke he built between Wales and Mercia is a testament to that.

For raiding Vikings, sourcing meat was dependant on whichever part of the country they were plundering, moving from one base to the next when supplies ran out. Most major towns in later Saxon England, as is consistent with the remains excavated at Castle Mall, Norwich, would have acquired their meat in several ways, with animals bred on site, animals brought into the town, and carcasses sold in the marketplace.⁹

Evidence from numerous sites across England suggests that pig meat was eaten with more frequency than any other animal. Certainly I have found this to be the case during the earlier Saxon era. There are some exceptions though, as with a site in Hartlepool, associated with a former monastery. Here, the vast amount of sheep and goat bones excavated far exceeded that of pig or cattle, contributing some seventy-three per cent of all the bone fragments found. Pig remains accounted for just eight per cent. It is thought that sheep were reared and culled very close by, and that lambs



A spic-hus, or bacon/lard house, with salted meat, West Stow village.

were slaughtered at under one year in age, while another cull of sheep, those five years and over, took place annually.¹⁰

The six surviving texts of the Ely farming memoranda, Cambridgeshire, dating to the early 1000s, provide a wealth of information in terms of monastery and land management relating to Ely's Benedictine abbey. This was a mixed male and female community with a line of royal abbesses who partnered with nearby Thorney Abbey, and there are records of tenant farmers, slaves and hired staff, like that of a man named Ælfnoth, possibly a master herdsman, who was in charge of '40 oxen', '250 sheep', '47 goats', '15 calves', '200 cheeses' and '43 fitches' of bacon.¹¹ Pigs were also highly prized at Ely, with swine herds registered across eight of the monastery's estates. The pigs are even categorised as 'old/full grown swine' (*eald spyn*), 'younger swine' (*geongran spyn*), hogs (*hoggas*) and sows (*sige*). This is evidence again of the importance placed upon pig meat and its abounding presence in the Anglo-Saxon diet.¹²

Pigs were abundant as they roamed wild in the woods, their meat salted in a *spic-hus*, or bacon/lard house, which is where the word larder derives.

In 838 King Ecgberht of Wessex, once exiled and then credited with developing the kingdom of Wessex into a powerful stronghold, granted four 'sulungs' (units of land found only in Kent) in Kent to Bishop Beornmod of Rochester, with a mill, and the right to gather wood and pasture swine in four districts.¹³ In fact, the ninth and tenth centuries in particular are full of Kentish records of kings granting land to the church for pasturing swine.

Wild pigs or boars, which were enthusiastically hunted on foot with spears, were, on the testimony old Norse mythology, fairly revered creatures that appear in the *Eddas*, a generic term for collective narrative poems written anywhere between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, although some of the poems have been credited with an earlier provenance, perhaps as far back as the eighth century.

These works were traditionally attributed to Sæmundr Sigfusson, born in

Iceland in 1056, who was a direct descendant of King Harald Hildetonn, and to the Icelandic poet and historian Snorri Sturluson, who died in the mid-thirteenth century. A portion of the *Eddas*, known as *The Younger Eddas of Sturleson*, contains a story relating to Valhalla. It describes what slain warriors would eat and drink in the great hall of Valhalla in Asgard, the mythological place where those who died in combat would aspire to travel after death.¹⁴



An Anglo-Saxon cooking pot.

A cook called Andhrimnir prepared '*Sæhrimnir*' in his mighty cooking pot named *Eldhrimnir* every night for all the new souls entering Valhalla. There is some debate over the exact translation of *Sæhrimnir*, but it is a word widely understood to mean pig, or wild pig. The poem declares *Sæhrimnir* to be 'the best of flesh'. In terms of the drinks offered to those entering the great hall, water is considered a meagre gift for those who had volunteered their lives in battle. Instead, the refreshment with the highest status is that provided by the goat Heidrun, whose teats discharged mead daily into a giant vessel.¹⁵

These old Norse legends have a heritage that extends further back than early medieval times and it is feasible that the pagan Scandinavian immigrants of the British Isles would have coveted the food and drink referenced within this mythology.

It is worth mentioning that pigs in Anglo-Saxon times were not the characteristic pink swine we recognise today. These are the ancestors of wild pigs or boars. Adult wild boars are stocky with coarse, bristly, grey-brown hair, and the males have small protruding tusks from their mouths. They mainly live in forests, revealing themselves only to forage at night or early in the morning.

If you've ever been out walking in the dense woods of rural France you will be familiar with the warning signs alerting ramblers to the presence of wild boar. This is because the female boars are ferociously protective of their young, and have been known to attack humans when threatened. It is this fierce reputation that Anglo-Saxons upheld, with the image of the boar used in ceremonies and on weaponry. Helmets adorned with boar-shaped crests have been found in several burial sites in England.

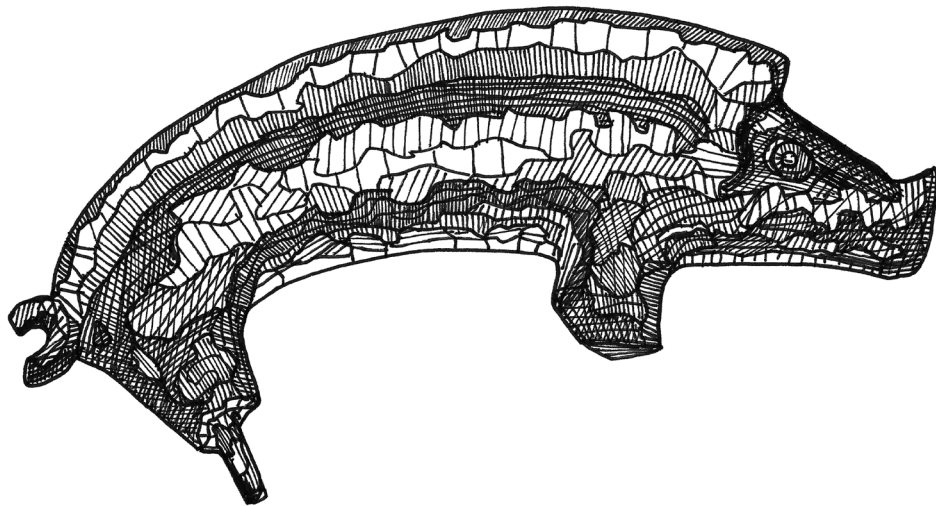
Boars were so over-hunted by the later medieval period that they were thought to be extinct, but they continue to roam in some regions of England today, most notably in the Forest of Dean.

Throughout this book you will find the narrative jumps from Roman, to Saxon, Frankish, Middle Eastern and Scandinavian sources. All these

communities directly and indirectly influenced Anglo-Saxon life, and consequently the type of food they would have consumed.

The Roman Vindolanda tablets were located just outside Hadrian's Wall in the north of England at the Roman fort of the same name. These extraordinary handwritten, postcard-sized tablets, written on wood with ink, contain household receipts and personal letters, among other records. They can offer a basic insight into what soldiers, slaves, women and merchants may have been eating in second-century England. As with any pre-literate and pre-democratic society, historical records of the lives of everyday people are often insubstantial. Given the lack of other resources available, reflecting on material such as the Vindolanda tablets that can help to inform us how a particular society may have eaten is invaluable.

One tablet refers to pork-crackling, or *callum*, a dish also mentioned in the fourth or fifth century Roman recipe collection, *De re coquinaria* or *De re culinaria*, which is more commonly referred to as *Apicius*, the name of the man the manuscript is often attributed to.¹⁶



The Guilden Morden boar, an Anglo-Saxon boar-shaped helmet ornament.

As food stocks were unpredictable, it is hardly surprising that every bit of an animal would be cooked and consumed, dried, or preserved in some way. The Romans certainly ate the skin of the pig as well as its tail and feet. One recipe in *De re coquinaria* notes that all these parts were cooked and served with broth and the ancient – and now extinct – plant, laser or silphium, a type of giant fennel.¹⁷ The Anglo-Saxons would undoubtedly have used pork fat to grease their cooking pans, and other off-cuts would have been thrown into meat puddings or sausages. Cooked pork was pickled by the Romans in a mixture of mustard, vinegar, salt, and honey. Incidentally, the womb of a sow was considered a delicacy in ancient Rome. Whether the Anglo-Saxons shared that taste or not is a matter of debate.¹⁸

Although many varieties of birds were an edible option, it is likely that the Anglo-Saxons may not have consumed much duck meat, as geese and hens regularly appear in food-rents for that time, but never ducks, and while duck bones do register in minimal numbers in archaeological evidence, they are often the bones of wild, not domesticated farm-reared ducks.¹⁹ There is a theory that ducks were valued less, due to their unpleasant



Chicken cooking on a medieval spit.

feeding habits, and if they were eaten at all it would have mostly been by the lower classes of society.²⁰ Evidence of ducks in the mainstream diet appear much more frequently in the later Middle Ages. Geese and ducks are native to the British Isles, but chickens must have been introduced into Britain from elsewhere, sometime during the Iron Age, perhaps directly from Asia or via another part of Europe. It was the Romans who popularised chicken meat in England, possibly because they were considered sacred. Evidence of high levels of chicken bones throughout the country denote that they were a popular source of food during the Anglo-Saxon period. There was also an old Roman tradition maintaining the rather eccentric belief that watching ducks in flight could stimulate the healing process of many ailments, both for humans and horses.²¹ Perhaps it was considered more fortuitous to keep them in the sky, than to hunt them down. Evidence of grouse, pigeon and woodcock have been established at Roman sites in England and Anglo-Saxon communities must have had access to these game birds. The prolific Victorian translator of Old English medical texts, Oswald Cockayne, mentions birds stuffed with bread, parsley and herbs several times, which you can read more about in Chapter Three.

It is a fallacy to think that the common pheasant was introduced into England by the Normans. There is a wide field of research that contradicts this. To name a few: Tegetmeier (1873), Chauhan (2014), Palmer *et al* (1903), and old reports of the Paleontographical Society which clarify that pheasant remains have been unearthed in Roman refuse-heaps in both London and Colchester.²² The existence of an Old English word for pheasant, *wór-hana* provides further evidence of its existence between the Roman and Norman occupations.²³

Your average Anglo-Saxon would probably have hunted pheasants much like the Romans, with a spear and a great deal of optimism. Another animal known for its meat, which has also long been assumed to have been gifted to the English by the Normans, is the rabbit. However the significant presence of rabbit bones found at Castle Mall, Norwich, dating to the Anglo-Saxon period suggest they may have

been present earlier. In an Ancient Monuments Laboratory Report, archaeologists Umberto Albarella, Mark Beech, and Jacqui Mulville note that possible cross-contamination of specimens from this site may date the rabbit bones as later, but it is still a consideration.²⁴ Large quantities of rabbit bones were also identified at the Anglo-Saxon site of Flixborough in Lincolnshire, which were considered to be unusual for the era. Due to lack of funding, archaeologists were unable to directly date the remains, and as such they were reluctantly listed as possibly intrusive bones from a later era.²⁵ Additional rabbit bones have been unearthed at a fifth-century site in Cumbria,²⁶ and at a Roman Villa in Milton Keynes.²⁷ There are further Anglo-Saxon sites that report this type of finding. The reason for the presence of rabbit bones in the Anglo-Saxon era remains unidentified. There was no Old English word for rabbit, but they may have been thought of as hares, or as they were called, *hara*, for which there was a word. Hares are also perplexing. The only native species is the Mountain hare which mostly resides in Scotland or the north of England. Romans are frequently credited with bringing brown hares to England, but the latest research suggests they arrived as early as the Iron Age, along with chickens, both of which were given supernatural status. The Roman cook book *De re coquinaria* is full of culinary hare recipes, but rabbit is barely mentioned at all. If the Romans rarely ate rabbits, what did they do with them? Were they pets? Kept for their fur, as food for larger animals, like dogs, or did they simply prefer the taste of hare? The Latin words *lepus/leporem* are associated with hare, and *cuniculus* for rabbit, so there was a distinction, and *leporaria* were enclosures for hares. Enough additional evidence exists from sites like Fishbourne and Lynford in Norfolk, where rabbit bones dating to the Roman era in England have also been found, to suggest that rabbits were present at this time. Nonetheless, Dr. Francis Wenban-Smith of the University of Southampton confirms that rabbits were actually a common feature of the Palaeolithic British landscape in Swanscombe and north-west Kent, long before the Romans. Recorded evidence of their presence apparently is then scant after this.²⁸

If the Romans re-introduced rabbits, or at least gave them more of a

presence, they may well have continued into the Anglo-Saxon era, in accordance with all the archaeological evidence. Perhaps they were simply known to this later society collectively as hares/*hara*. We know from Ælfric's *Colloquy* that hares were hunted, and remains have been found at a variety of Anglo-Saxon settlements including West Stow, York and the cemetery site at Spong Hill, among others.

The importance of sheep in the Anglo-Saxon diet must not be underestimated. Sheep were exploited for all their assets – milk, cheese, meat, parchment, leather, and wool. The history of sheep breeds is convoluted and complex. The hardy, coarse fleeced Herdwicks have long been linked to Scandinavia and cross-cultural comparative wool sample research has confirmed this. Soay sheep are indigenous to Scotland, and it is understood that they were bred with white-faced sheep, similar to the Merino breed by the Romans, giving rise to the white or tanned face horned sheep which are found in Scotland and western England. The general black-faced, hairy, and horned sheep most associated with the North and North East were possibly introduced by the Danes, who predominantly occupied those regions. Some long-haired sheep, which are sometimes referred to as 'golden fleece' varieties, including the Cotswold and Lincoln breeds, were established by the Romans. Both Roman and Danish settlers also pushed their established native flocks out into different regions of England, which is why some breeds are found today in different counties.²⁹ It is now also widely recognised that Black Welsh Mountain sheep are also genetically Scandinavian and were introduced by the Vikings.

Over a period spanning the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, sheep – as opposed to cattle – appeared to be the more dominant animal; this is evident in some parts of the country, in particular from a range of remains discovered at a site in Newbury, Berkshire. The importance of sheep in Newbury decreased significantly by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, rapidly increasing again in the following centuries, but nonetheless still a third smaller than their overall dominance in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The sheep remains that were unearthed were predominantly from meat-bearing parts, acquired for food.³⁰

Similarly, sheep bones consisted of between sixty and sixty-five per cent of all the animal bones collected at the late Saxon farmstead, Eckweek in Avon.³¹

Writing in the eighth century, the Venerable Bede talks about both the importance of the Paschal festival and the eating of the sacrificial lamb, which is now recognised as the Christian festival of Easter. The archaic English word for 'Easter', *Pasch*, derives via Latin and Greek from the Hebrew *pesakh*, the Passover. As Bede, quoting from a letter by Abbot Ceofrid on the subject, records:

Christ our Paschal Lamb is slain and has made the Lord's day, which among the ancients was called the first after the sabbath, a solemn day to us for the joy of his resurrection, the apostolic tradition has so inserted it into the Paschal festivals as to decree, that nothing in the least be anticipated, or detracted from the time of the legal Passover; but rather ordains, that the same first month should be waited for, pursuant to the precept of the law, and accordingly the fourteenth day of the same, and the evening thereof. And when this day should happen to fall on the Sabbath, everyone in his family should take a lamb, and kill it in the evening, that is, that all the churches throughout the world, composing one Catholic church, should provide bread and wine for the mystery of the flesh and blood of the unspotted lamb 'that took away the sins of the World' and after the solemnity of reading the lessons and prayers of the Paschal ceremonies, they should offer up these things to the Lord, in hopes of future redemption. For that same night in which the people of Israel were delivered out of Egypt by the blood of the Lamb, is the very same in which all the people of God were, by Christ's resurrection, delivered from eternal death. Then on the first day of the Paschal festival; for that is the day on which our Lord, with much joy of pious revelation, made known the glory of his resurrection.³²

If you would like to indulge in a roasted lamb (or at least a part of it), the

following recipe has been a staple of mine for years and never seems to fail. Accompanied by seasonal vegetables, mint sauce, or redcurrant jelly it makes for an ideal Easter feast – or any kind of feast really.

*

SLOW ROAST LAMB

Ingredients (serves 3-4):

1 kg lamb shoulder or leg

garlic cloves

rosemary

garlic bulb

1 carrot

1 onion

1 celery stick

mixed dried herbs

2 or 3 bay leaves

olive oil

salt & pepper

250ml of water

Method

Preheat the oven to 170°C / 325°F / gas mark 3 (slightly lower for a fan oven).

Roughly chop the carrot, onion and celery and add to your roasting pan. Sometimes I just use whatever vegetables I have to hand, this might be leek, or parsnip. Basically just try and stick to more root-based vegetables as this will be enhancing your stock for the gravy, as well as infusing the meat. Remove cloves from half the bulb and throw about three or four in with the vegetables unpeeled. Sprinkle with a selection of dried herbs. I use oregano, mint, coriander, marjoram and of course rosemary. Add your bay leaves. Pour the water over.

Take your lamb and make a series of small incisions all over the meat, then stuff these with cloves from the other half of the bulb of garlic (you will need to peel and chop to size to get the cloves to fit) and sprigs of fresh rosemary. The more you can stuff in the better. Rub the lamb all over with lots of olive oil, salt, and pepper.

Now this is the important bit. If you don't like your lamb too greasy, and I really don't, then place a wire rack over the top of your vegetables and water and place the meat onto the rack, not directly into the water and vegetables.

Cover your lamb and the roasting tray tightly with foil. Pop it in the oven.

Roast for about an hour and thirty minutes, but check to make sure the water has not all evaporated and to gauge whether it might need slightly less cooking time.

After the 90 minutes, or earlier if it's cooking faster, remove the foil and turn the oven up to about 200°C / 400°F / gas mark 6. Roast for another 20 minutes or so in order to really brown and crisp up the meat.

When you are happy with the look of the meat, remove the lamb to a separate plate, cover with foil and let it 'rest' for about 20 minutes.

You can then make a gravy using whatever is left in the roasting pan and by adding some stock, wine, and a little cornflour to thicken. Just bring the whole lot to simmer on the hob, stirring continuously to ensure you mix the cornflour thoroughly and to avoid any lumps.

*

Interestingly deer, particularly red deer, deposits are common across many early medieval archaeological sites in Britain, but it may be a misconception to think that venison was widely eaten.³³ Antlers and bone were a precious commodity for making anything from combs, to spoons, knife handles, writing tablets and jewellery. Deer, it seems, may also have been central to another symbolic act of bonding or male fellowship of some kind. The burnt bones of deer are frequently recorded in finds relating to Anglo-Saxon foodstuffs. Naomi Sykes notes that according to William Perry Marvin, in his book *Hunting Law and Ritual in Medieval English Literature*, the hunting, butchering, and sharing of these animals during the mid-Saxon period, bound together 'arms bearing men'.³⁴ Marvin goes on to discuss documented medieval customs relating to game meat, as recorded by Edward of Norwich in the early 1400s, and George Gascoigne a century later. It was tradition for the hunters,

in particular a person of rank in the group, to cut off the deer's head before it was 'caboched', in other words:

[...] it is cut close by the hornes through the braine pan, until you come underneath the eyes, and ther it is cut off. The piece which is cut from the hornes (together with the braines) are to rewarde the houndes. That other piece is to nayle up the hornes by, for a memoriall, if he were a great Deare of heade.³⁵

In addition, the Venerable Bede informs us that Ireland was 'noted for the hunting of stags and roe-deer'.³⁶

Hartshorn – or the antlers of deer when boiled and ground down – was once exploited as a form of ammonia for medicinal purposes. It is possible that hartshorn may also have been used at this time as an early leavening agent, which was its primary function during the later medieval period. I have come across numerous recipes for its ability to set jellies and blanchmanges. Many Anglo-Saxon leechdoms contained hartshorn, like this one for a headache:

[...] take ashes of harts horn, mingle with vinegar and juice of rose, bind on the cheek.³⁷

The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets notes that hartshorn was regularly used in traditional Scandinavian and German baking to produce a really crisp cookie.³⁸ It is doubtful that German and Scandinavian cooks would have been juggling the merits of improved biscuit baking in Anglo-Saxon England, but they were aware of its properties and perhaps it was this awareness that led to its future use for them as a firming agent. Having cooked with hartshorn myself when recreating historic recipes, I can testify that it is one of the foulest ingredients, and is so caustic that today a packet of it (mostly manufactured for dogs) often comes accompanied with a warning.

With a background of French, Germanic and Roman influences relating to food, eating, and cooking, the medicinal/culinary manuscript *De*

observacione ciborum (*On the Observance of Foods*) is often heralded as the first French cookery book. Written in the sixth century by the Byzantine physician, Anthimus, as an advisory letter to the King of the Franks, it reflects some of the wider global ideas on cooking of the time, ideas which would potentially have extended to Northern Europeans. Anthimus' suggestions for cooking beef, as translated here by Mark Grant, would not have been uncommon to Anglo-Saxon communities:

Beef which has been steamed can be used both roasted in a dish and also braised in a sauce, provided that, as soon as it begins to give off a smell, you put the meat in some water. Boil it in as much fresh water as suits the size of the portion of meat; you should not have to add any more water during the boiling. When the meat is cooked, put in a casserole with about half a cup of sharp vinegar, some leeks and a little pennyroyal, some celery and fennel, and let these simmer for one hour. Then add half the quantity of honey to vinegar, or as much honey as you wish for sweetness. Cook over a low heat, shaking the pot frequently with one's hands so that the sauce coats the meat sufficiently. Then grind the following: 50 pepper corns, 2 grammes each of costmary and spikenard, and 1.5 grammes of cloves. Carefully grind all these spices together in an earthenware mortar with the addition of a little wine. When well ground, add them to the casserole and stir well, so that before they are taken from the heat, they warm up and release their flavour into the sauce. Whenever you have a choice of honey or have successfully reduced the sauce by either by a third or two-thirds, add one of these as detailed above. Do not use a bronze pan, because the sauce tastes better cooked in an earthenware casserole.³⁹

This is a sophisticated recipe, well ahead of its time and it does raise the question of whether some people were cooking using far more sophisticated techniques than the ones we so often ascribe to the early medieval period. Beef was found to be the staple diet of Anglo-Saxon communities occupying parts of York, when archaeologists unearthed tons of bones during excavations in the 1970s. Middens, or dumps for domestic waste, also revealed 'pork, venison, horsemeat, wildfowl, geese and some thirty-five

different fish, both marine and freshwater'.⁴⁰ Horse meat may well have been used as food for dogs. This is because for much of the Anglo-Saxon period hippophagy, or the practice of eating horse-flesh, was disapproved of. Nonetheless, thirty per cent of early Saxon settlements contained evidence of the butchered bones of horses. As Christianity grew in strength and horsemeat consumption decreased, there remains a theory that horsemeat may still have been consumed in times of famine and even for feasting.⁴¹

Neither are recorded as being in the culinary Anglo-Saxon food chain, but both fox and badger make an appearance in the leechdoms. 'Fox suet' was thought to maintain eye health when placed on the lids for a total of thirty nights,⁴² while badgers' testicles soaked in spring water and honey could assist with anyone who 'may not enjoy his lusts'.⁴³ It was common throughout the medieval period for the parts of animals and plants that represented or resembled human attributes, to be used medicinally in association with those same parts, hence testicles as a remedy for impotence. Crows are a further example: instructions for curing a headache by cooking up the brains of this black feathered bird are outlined in the 'Leiden Leechbook', a ninth-century manuscript compilation of medicinal remedies.⁴⁴

Some animals like foxes and badgers were considered inedible and were utilised in other ways. There is no rationale to this, other than the fact that early medieval cultures may have found them unclean or unfit for human consumption. Instead, creatures like this were deemed magical and medicinal.

Cockayne remarks that the monks of Abingdon feasted on meat puddings during periods when they weren't fasting, the diet for which mostly involved consuming eels, milk, and standard beer.⁴⁵ There was a word for meat pudding, *mearghæccel*, with '*hæccel*' meaning chopped.⁴⁶ A bit like the Roman sausage, it is assumed that this chopped meat was forced into some sort of animal intestine and then probably boiled or smoked.

Sausages would undoubtedly have been eaten in Anglo-Saxon times, as this was a foodstuff introduced by the Romans not to be disregarded.

The existence of Anglo-Saxon vocabulary such as *gehæcca* ('sausage-meat') and *mearghæccoelf*, which was more of a substantial meat pudding, are testament to this.

The most common type of sausage during Roman times was the Lucanian sausage, heralding from Southern Italy, although the Greeks were making similar versions much earlier than this. It is an ancient, rustic pork creation, slightly spiced and then smoked. A recipe can be found in the Roman culinary collection, *De re coquinaria*. These would undoubtedly have been eaten in Britain during the time of Roman rule.

*

Lucanian Sausage [or meat pudding]: crush pepper, cumin, savory, rue, parsley, condiment, laurel berries and broth; mix with finely chopped [fresh pork] and pound well with broth. To this mixture, being rich, add whole pepper and nuts. When filling casings carefully push the meat through. Hang sausage up to smoke.⁴⁷

It is possible these sausages are also similar to the ones prepared by cooks in the early medieval period. According to the *Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery* (2012) the first reference to a sausage/pudding, akin to a haggis, can be found in Anglo-Norman texts of the thirteenth century. I find it hard to believe, considering the Romans and the Normans enjoyed them, that the period in between did not also indulge in sausages, particularly as pork was consumed in abundance. Sausage-making was a well-established technique.

I decided to make my own contemporary version of the renowned Lucanian sausage, while remaining true to its spirit and adding those most prized of Anglo-Saxon nuts, the hazelnut, and came up with the following recipe. This is a very tasty sausage indeed, with the slight crunchy texture of the hazelnuts and delicious fragrant spices.

*

EMMA'S CONTEMPORARY ROMANO-BRITISH INSPIRED SAUSAGE

Ingredients (makes around 4):

butcher's sausage casings (natural)

180g chopped pork meat – loin, leg or shoulder will do.

1 tsp peppercorns

1 tsp cumin seeds

1 tsp dried juniper berries

1 tsp dried or fresh parsley

about 2 tbsps of vegetable stock (if the meat is drowning in it, drain some of the liquid off)

20 g crushed hazelnuts

salt to taste

Method

Soak your sausage casings in water overnight or for a good few hours until pliable.

Chop your pork meat quite fine, or use an electric chopper; remember this has got to be stuffed into your tiny sausage skins.

Grind together the pepper, cumin, juniper, and parsley.

Mix together the pork, ground spices and herbs. Add the cold vegetable stock and finally the crushed hazelnuts and salt to taste. Ensure your mixture is not too sloppy.

Now comes the tricky part. You will need to expand your sausage skins as much as possible, being careful not to break them. I do have a sausage-making accessory for my food mixer, but since I'm only making a few sausages it seems quicker to just fill them manually. And since the Anglo-Saxons certainly didn't have that luxury, it is good to try doing it the authentic way! I used the handle of a wooden spoon to help expand the casings very gently, while adding the mixture with a very small, narrow spoon.

Remember to tie a knot in the bottom of your casing, or the meat will just come straight out.

Once you have successfully filled your sausages, tie a good knot to

seal them off and you're ready to cook them however you choose. I fried mine in some olive oil. Simple and tasty.

*

A manuscript known as the *Old English Orosius* is a translated, or rather paraphrased version of *Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem*, which was originally compiled around the fifth century by the Roman historian and advocate of Christianity Paulus Orosius. The later version written sometime in the ninth century remains anonymous but is often credited to King Alfred the Great, a claim which has not been authenticated. Whoever wrote it added new passages, deleted others but most notably also included a new narrative documenting the voyages of Norwegian travellers which provides valuable information about this region during the Anglo-Saxon era.⁴⁸

In the text of *Orosius* the two travellers, Ohthere and Wulfstan, the former a Viking trader, were both known to King Alfred. Their travels around the Scandinavian coast reveal all manner of geographical, economic, political, and social information. From the description of Ohthere's assets, we can glean that he was a prominent member of society. It also tells us that receiving rent for goods was an established system, one that was replicated by the Anglo-Saxons in Britain:

He [Ohthere] is a very wealthy man [...] He had, moreover [...] six hundred tame deer of his own breeding. They call these reindeer: of these, six were decoy-deer, which are very valuable among Finns, because with them they take the wild-deer. He was amongst the first men in the land, though he had not more than twenty horned cattle, twenty sheep and twenty swine; and the little that he ploughed, he ploughed with horses. But their revenue is chiefly in the tribute, that the Finns pay them, which tribute is in skins of animals, feathers of birds, in whale-bone, and ship-ropes, which are made from the whale's hide and from the seal's.⁴⁹

Annual food-rents from large estates to the church was a very common