

Civic commensality in late-medieval England: mayors and their meals

Recently, new research has revised sociological and anthropological interpretation of the common meal: commensality.¹ The focus has been placed particularly on intermittent common meals, festive occasions, ritual meals, ceremonial eating, and celebratory occasions. There are potential dangers for the cultural and social historian in all of these approaches: assigning homologous culture; assuming innate human nature; exaggerating the genetic response; returning to structuralism and functionalism; and accepting a dominant culture as the only interpretation. Historians have been adept and critical in their responses to these problems and pitfalls. Context has been defined as critical. Even so, there remains the possibility of under-estimating difference and dissent.

In the most recent archaeological and anthropological literature, for example, there are considerable divergences. Jones commences with a comparison of Marvin Harris's (bio-)ecological explanation of food-sharing and Mary Douglas's symbolic anthropology.² This binary opposition seems as restrictive as Douglas's own explanatory framework of purity and contaminated. In contrast to Jones, Hayden allows much more polysemy in the meanings of the feast, admitting a wide diversity of motives and understanding.³ Where they correspond is in maintaining that primacy should be attributed to 'observable behavior', not what the actors profess to be doing.⁴ The historian, of course, does not have the privilege of participant-observer, only the detritus of the document. Even so, we might challenge the relegation of actors' comment of their action – their belief.

In view of this recent literature, it may be an opportune time to (re-)consider the potentialities of

1 S. Kerner, C. Chou, and M. Warmind (eds), *Commensality from Everyday Food to Feast* (London, 2015); M. Jones, *Feast. Why Humans Share Food* (Oxford, 2007); B. Hayden, *The Power of Feasts. From Prehistory to the Present* (Cambridge, 2014); I. K. Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving. Informal Support and Gift-exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2008), 169-80. J. M. Bennett, 'Conviviality and charity in early modern England', *Past and Present*, 134 (1992), 18-41.

2 Jones, *op.cit.*, 4-12.

3 Hayden, *op. cit.*, esp. 175-6.

4 Hayden, *op. cit.*, 351.

common meals in the civic calendar in late-medieval England. The interpretations which have been suggested, have great resonance, but the intention here is not only to re-examine them but to attempt to expand them. The sequence consists of several discrete sections, although there is inevitably some overlap. It is important to discuss in some detail the genealogy of anthropological interpretation of ritual, and thus, inherently, the ceremonial meal. Another component is a recapitulation and discussion of perhaps the most eloquent of dissections, that by Gervase Rosser, for which no apology is needed because it is both so insightful and recent. The potential for the neo-functionalist position is adumbrated through recounting a particular episode in early-fifteenth-century Norwich. More substantially and substantively, there is a concentration on the mayor's dinner, the most symbolic of late-medieval civic feasts, particularly as it evolved in the borough of Leicester. Finally, some comments ensue on the potential for rhetorical display and dissent.

Ceremonial and commemorative dinners persist in various forms, especially as an aspect of local political organization. This sort of meal remained part of the structure of local government into the nineteenth century and assisted in structuring the annual cycle of civic governance. Principal among these occasions in English medieval local governance was the mayor's meal or annual dinner. From the late twelfth century, some urban places in England began to accumulate new privileges which separated them from the shire or county authority and distinguished them from other towns. Where the urban place was also the location of an ecclesiastical see, an archdiocese or diocese, the urban authority acquired higher status as a city. Other urban places which acquired privileges of self-governance were designated boroughs. By and large, these privileges ('freedom') were received from and relinquished by the Crown. In numerous of these boroughs new constitutions were adopted by the middle and late thirteenth century, ultimately a conciliar form of governance, with a mayor as the principal officer advised by a council, usually of twelve, which represented counsel by the urban elite, the principal burgesses. The origins of this dominant burghal office, the mayor, varied, in some places developing

out of the *commune* or organic movement of the principal inhabitants of the borough in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, in others from the transition of the principal officer of the gild merchant (the organization of the burgesses for commerce and trade) to aldermanric and then mayoral status. Where the burgesses' main organization was the borough court (or 'portmoot'), the principal officers were sometimes the bailiffs (as in Ipswich) and no mayor was instituted until much later. In short, although some boroughs did not institute a mayoral office until later (as Norwich below), by the middle and late thirteenth century the acknowledged premiership, as *primus inter pares*, in most of the developing boroughs of medieval England was the mayor.⁵

In the course of time, it became incumbent on the mayor to entertain his council and sometimes a wider representation of the burgesses to an annual meal or dinner. This occasion thus exhibited some of the features of ritual (as well as ceremonial) occasions, repetitive in time and space, occurring at liminal periods of transition from one mayoralty to another. In the character of its performance and organization, this meal is thus open to the wider interpretations of ritual action suggested not only by historians, but also anthropologists and sociologists, on whom, indeed, some historians have already drawn, but whose considerations are varied, contested, and constantly being revised.

In terms of the anthropological literature, most interpretations refer back implicitly or explicitly to the seminal work by Marcel Mauss on 'the gift'.⁶ Although most of the context of *The Gift* was not concerned with the meal, many later interpreters have opted to emphasize this singular legacy from Mauss. As a relative and acolyte of Durkheim, Mauss ineluctably accepted some of the Durkheimian agenda. The theme in *The Gift* which thus resonates so emphatically is the reciprocity inherent in the gift, usually deferred to avoid insult.⁷ The gift thus enhanced solidarity.

5 G. H. Martin, 'The English borough in the thirteenth century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th series, 13 (1963), 123-44.

6 M. Mauss, 'Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', *L'Année Sociologique* 1 (1923-4), 30-186, trans. I. Cunnison, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York, 1967); L. Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (New York, 1983), esp. p. xix.

7 G. Herman, *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City* (Cambridge, 1987), 58-69.

When he addressed the 'potlatch', however, Mauss introduced the politics of the gift precisely in the context of the meal. This perceptive episode in *The Gift* has sometimes been ignored or misconstrued. The potlatch was competitive and involved destruction.⁸ Mauss thus, contrary to some analysts, bequeathed *two* subtle contentions. It is impossible to rehearse here all the subsequent anthropological literature on ritual as it might bear on commensality. What is considered is the approach which has most informed (until recently) historical interpretation (Geertz, for example) and some different and diverse interpretive frameworks which have been less influential, but which merit consideration. The review is necessarily selective.

In a rather brusque and reductive manner, we might consider that the dominant interpretive position of anthropologists through much of the twentieth century conformed to the first Maussian interpretation: the emphasis on the meal as propitiating reciprocity and solidarity. That understanding perhaps resurfaced in influential dissections of ritual by the late Roy Rappaport. Rappaport superficially extended beyond Mauss in bringing into consideration the ecological dimension. In his elucidation of the primary ritual of the Tsembaga Maring of Papua New Guinea, Rappaport asserted an equivalence between ecological equilibrium and social homeostasis. The ritual at issue involved a food product, the pig. The production of pigs was periodically interrupted by ritual culling. This cycle of destruction occurred when the pig population had become out of balance with human demography, that is the cost of sustaining the pigs exceeded the capacity of the human population. The ritual cycle involved the bouts of fighting and hostility which were symbolically terminated by the planting of rumbin. Most significant here, however, was the slaughter of the excess pig population for a 'pigfeast' which also demarcated the end of hostilities and reconciliation. Pork was distributed to those who had engaged in the latest combats, to commemorate the spirits of the ancestors and restore relationships.⁹

8 Hayden, *op. cit.*, 83-4.

9 Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (New Haven, CT, 1967; reprinted 1984); Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge, 1999).

Rappaport broke new ground in the ecological dimension of ritual activity, following the ecological suggestions of Wynne-Edwards.¹⁰ Despite this direct influence, the resonances with Mauss's potlatch are visible: the expenditure and destruction at a time of surfeit. Contrary to the implications of the potlatch, nonetheless, Rappaport's conclusion was a neo-functionalist one: that the purpose of the pigfeast was to restore harmony, to maintain solidarity, social cohesion and shared identity.

The alternative strand from Mauss has been mainly (although not exclusively) pursued by sociologists and literary theorists *cum* philosophers: the significance of excess, 'expenditure' and destruction. The feast can thus consist entirely of expenditure (*La notion de dépense*) in Bataille's extension of Mauss on the potlatch. What is exhibited in the feast is unlimited abundance and the ability to engage in squander, destruction, loss and waste, without utility. The feast is a social drama enacted for display.¹¹ Bataille's advancement of Mauss's gift as *prestation totale* advances the 'notion of expenditure' and the 'accursed share'. Bataille does not expect the counter-gift in a cycle of gift exchange; the impulsion to excess is inherent in the social economy. "The "accursed share" is that which is "destined for consumption", i.e. that which must be sacrificed, that which is the excess of society'. There is no return, no utility, no investment in productive terms, although, as criticism, it could be argued that the confirmation of honour and dignity is 'utility' in a wide sense. Bataille and Maurice Blanchot were closely associated in this extension of Mauss. (Bataille graduated from the *École des Chartes* and was employed at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* as a numismatist and curator of medallions). For Blanchot, there may be another sense of excess or going beyond, if we consider the feast as a text: the ineffable which cannot be discerned.¹² In the case of both Bs, however, although the action is centred on excessive consumption, the referent is the self. The central figure could correspond

10 V. C. Wynne-Edwards, *Animal Dispersion in Relation to Social Behaviour* (London, 1962).

11 P. Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London, 2000), 32-54 ('The general economy'), 47. See also, 'Introduction', in F. Botting and S. Wilson (eds), *Bataille. A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 1998), 16-18, and J. Habermas, 'The French path to postmodernity', in *Bataille. A Critical Reader*, 182-88.

12 U. Haase and W. Large, *Maurice Blanchot* (London, 2001), pp. 21-23, 29.

to the chief who furnishes the potlatch, but the resonance is introspective. It doesn't engage with the politics of the action nor extend to exogenous domination. The extension of the notion of expenditure, is, nonetheless, apposite and important in the context of the ritual feast.

At this point, some reference needs to be made to the impact of postmodern philosophy on the interpretation of ritual to refer to the wider context of the ritual feast. Primary here is the hermeneutic anthropology of Clifford Geertz, privileging the interpretation of culture above explanation and causation.¹³ Geertz nevertheless deduces a homology of cultural understanding: the (unique) meaning of the habitual activity is comprehended by the whole of the local society and assimilated by each actor. This last complexity is of particular concern in 'interpretive' anthropology, the hermeneutic investigation of cultural events. The tendency might be to accept the rhetoric of the event as final. Thus representation becomes the only reality. In this case, what is achieved is simply confirming a dominant or hegemonic culture. Such an inclination can become the anthropologist's reconstruction rather than deconstruction when the observer, like Geertz, treats the event as a text. In this deductive inquiry, the anthropologist might impose one interpretation when, in fact, there is a range of interpretations of the text within the confines of its context: that is, there may be multiple perceptions of the event, but our understandings of them must be delimited by the historical context.¹⁴ In fine, Geertz's predilection for reading ritual activity as a text is potentially productive, but the deduction of consistently homologous culture looks less sustainable. As a modification, Sewell has proposed 'thin coherence', which allows for both a dominant reading and internal contradictions.¹⁵

Departing from Geertz's maximal cultural coherence, some anthropologists have dared to

13 W. H. Sewell Jr, 'Geertz, cultural systems, and history: from synchrony to transformation', in S. B. Ortner (ed.), *The Fate of Culture: Geertz and Beyond* (Berkeley, 1999), 35-55. C. Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), 118-33 ('History and Anthropology').

14 For example, C. Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ, 1981) and his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973) ('Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight').

15 W. H. Sewell Jr, 'The concept(s) of culture', in V. E. Bonnell and L. Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 35-61.

suggest that a single cultural understanding is not understood by the actors, but that each imbues the ritual activity with a personal purpose and meaning. The action is separate from the ideology. In particular, diverse individual motives have been detected in the performance of the Jain ritual of the *puja*.¹⁶ The possibility then exists of a diversity of perceptions by actors congregated at a ritual feast.

Finally, Harrison has recognized the potential for the reinsertion of politics into the *organization* of ritual. Although ritual is sublime and timeless (if also at a particular time and space) in its repetition, it does need to be organized on each occasion.¹⁷ It does not just happen; there has to be some mechanism for its performance. This necessity creates the space for competition (even conflict) in the preliminary arrangement for the conduct of the ritual: political manipulation, certainly in hierarchical society (within privileged groups and between in and out groups) and perhaps even in presumed acephalic ones (within and between kinships groups). How far the subsequent performance of the ritual manifestly 'healed' those divisions remains a moot point. The agenda for the interpretation of the ritual meal has thus been opened.

Rosser on commensality

At this point, we can move from these particular events to consider more specifically the wider implications of civic commensality in medieval England.¹⁸ The most formative and eloquent comment has concerned guilds and fraternities, most recently encapsulated by the introduction to Gervase Rosser's *The Art of Solidarity*.¹⁹ Consideration of the common dinner of guilds and fraternities is useful by analogy, presenting some characteristics which might be replicated in the civic meal in boroughs and cities. At one level, the fraternity's feast did indeed promote 'community' through the congregation for

16 C. Humphries and J. Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship* (Oxford, 1994).

17 S. J. Harrison, 'Ritual as intellectual property', *Man*, new series, 27 (1992), 225-44.

18 P. Freedman, 'Medieval and modern banquets: commensality and social categorization', in *Commensality from Everyday Food to Feast*, 99-108.

19 G. Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford, 2015).

the meal.²⁰ Ostensibly, the emphasis is here on commensality reinforcing community. The occasion of the meal represents back to the community its commonality and solidarity, its mutuality. The inherent empathetic response was companionship and fellowship: 'the common repast was a normal way to give tangible expression to the companionship of the guild'.²¹ The rhetoric of community can thus be interpreted positively as a stimulus to harmony.

Rosser extends the argument further, however, developing his earlier excursus in 1994, which allowed community, now emphasizing more the opportunities for social capital, associationism, and the negotiation between individual and society. The feast provided opportunities for the contracting of new relationships, not only horizontally, but vertically, between equals and peers, but also between those of different age and status. Social bonds could thus be established across the membership of the guild, regardless of established position. The occasion of commensality furnished an environment for friendship and amicable contact. Equally, the formality of the occasion contributed to the sanctioning and cementing of the new ties. Once contracted in this formal, but friendly, atmosphere, these new social bonds could be extended to the outside world of everyday transactions. Formal membership thus facilitated informal networks of trust.²² The commonality of attributes fostered the networks.²³ 'Humble' and 'elders' were able to participate in this social networking.²⁴ To this extent, Rosser perceives the reinsertion of 'politics', with a lower-case p, into the negotiations for the organizing, attendance, and aftermath of the guild dinner, although it is a weak form of politics initially consistent only with social capital.²⁵ Accordingly, each participant could extract something particular from the communal occasion, so that individual identity was not entirely subsumed in or subjugated to

20 Rosser, *ibid.*, 3-4.

21 G. Rosser, 'Going to the fraternity feast: commensality and social relations in late medieval England', *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994), 430-446, at p. 431.

22 R. I. Rotberg, 'Introduction', in Rotberg (ed.), *Patterns of Social Capital: Stability and Change in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2001), 12.

23 Rosser, *Art of Solidarity*, 432.

24 Rosser, *ibid.*, 432.

25 Rosser, *ibid.*, 441.

communal rhetoric.²⁶

This commensality must be qualified, as Rosser admits, because it was ostensibly voluntary association.²⁷ Although compulsion might exist to attend the meal, belonging to the gild or fraternity was a voluntary arrangement and expression of the connection between self and others.²⁸ In the case of the mayor's feast, there was, in contrast, a considerable element of compulsion to attend, as will be explained further below. Indeed, it might even be possible to expect some latent coercion to attend the fraternity feast, for absence would be noticed, perhaps induce complaints of lack of solidarity, and some measure of ostracism ('the silent treatment').²⁹ Although presence was thus superficially voluntary, social expectation, as in all matters of 'community', made demands upon actors. 'Community' is permanently freighted with pressure to conform. In the case of feasts, entitlement also imputed obligation. Non-participation invited 'denigration'.³⁰

Vertical ties are ambiguous. Investing social capital in relationships across a hierarchy presents the question of altruism or interest. Who benefits and to what extent? Where 'natural' hierarchies are embedded, the social connection might devolve into patronage-clientage.³¹

Equally, the organization of a communal meal could be deployed to suppress dissent and to confirm acceptance of hierarchy and authority.³² The assembly also exhibits who is included and who is excluded in the community – and how those who are included participate.³³ It is only allowed to

26 Rosser, *ibid.*, 445.

27 For the historical depth to social capital, R. D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).

28 For a different conceptualization of the expansion of the 'associational world', P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), esp. 20-25.

29 K. P. Williams, *Ostracism: The Power of Silence* (New York, 2001), 11-12; G. Crow and G. Allen, *Community Life: An Introduction to Local Social Relations* (Harlow, 1994), 11.

30 Hayden, *op. cit.*, 68.

31 D. C. North, J. J. Wallis and B. R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge, 2009), 35-6.

32 Crow and Allen, *op. cit.*, 31.

33 G. Feely-Harnik, *The Lord's Table. The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Washington, D.C., 1994 edn), 11-13, for association through commensality, but also segregation.

represent itself to itself, however, because it is already pre-defined and because it convenes out of sight.³⁴ It sets itself apart, but segregates itself also at times of heightened social tension and anxiety; the distance of segregation increases the tension and might provoke resistance. Social closure promotes criticism. 'Consuming food and drink together may no doubt activate and tighten internal solidarity; but it happens because commensality first allows the limits of the group to be redrawn, its internal hierarchies to be restored and if necessary to be redefined'.³⁵ These are inherent characteristics of regularized civic commensality – annual feasts – to which we can return in the case of the mayor's feast below.

Finally, there may be a quite important difference between the meal in the socio-religious guild or fraternity and in the civic context. The common repast of guilds and fraternities might be imbued with the spirit of the *agape*, Christian table fellowship. There is a religious lineage from the early Christian love feasts. To expect the same infusion in the civic situation might be inappropriate. Despite prayers and devotions, the civic meal was entirely secular and worldly. The civic meal was composed, moreover, of delicacies and a weighty table, and invited the sin of gluttony, contrary to the conduct of the *agape*.³⁶ That excess is illustrated by events in Norwich in the early fifteenth century.

Discord and/or harmony: events in Norwich?

The context for the civic feasts in Norwich was contention over governance. In the late twelfth century, the pursuit of freedoms and privileges for boroughs had been advanced by the leading burgesses. In the middle of the thirteenth century, it thus seemed appropriate that these representatives should remain at the core of urban governance, as an organic and natural development. By the later middle ages, the political and constitutional arrangements decided in the middle of the thirteenth

34 C. Grignon, 'Commensality and social morphology: an essay on typology', in P. Scholliers (ed.), *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2001), 28-9 (quotation at p. 29).

35 Grignon, *ibid.*, 24.

36 J. Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating* (London, 2nd edn, 2000), 31-6.

century seemed exclusionary and closed. The lesser burgesses, the commons, negotiated for their greater involvement in civic affairs. The debate about the extent of 'oligarchy' and 'closure' is complicated and extensive, but what is clear is that the widening of participation in urban government did become an issue.³⁷

It was not until 1403 that Norwich acquired by royal charter the office of mayor.³⁸ As a consequence of some difference of interpretation of the mode of election or selection, appointment to the office was mired in controversy until a new constitution was agreed by all parties in 1415.³⁹ Disputes erupted between the *prudeshommes* (elite burgesses) and the commonalty in 1406 and in particular in 1414.⁴⁰ The organization of dining occasioned by these events illustrates some, but not all, of the aspects of civic commensality in the middle ages. In 1397-98, a special breakfast was hosted by the citizens at a cost of 34s. 7d., attended by local notables, the *mayor* of Lynn, and the sheriffs of Norfolk, for the honour of the city.⁴¹ The honour of the city involved the preparation for a new charter of liberties, with the appointment of a high official commensurate with Lynn's. After the successive disputes over the appointment of the mayor, an accord for a new constitution was achieved in 1415. This composition was mediated by the intervention of local notables. The process of arbitration was sustained by the continuous provision of food to the four arbiters, which endured from Sunday to Thursday, at a consolidated cost of more than £12.⁴² On some days, the repast consisted of quite common fare, but in large quantities, but on the Wednesday, at John Preston's ordinary, 27½ gallons of

37 J. A. F. Thompson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (Gloucester, 1988); S. Reynolds, 'Medieval urban history and the history of political thought', *Urban History Yearbook* 1982, 14-26; S. H. Rigby and E. Ewan, 'Urban political theory', in D. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Volume I 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), 305-6; R. H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525* (Cambridge, 1986), 218-35; M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995), 95-111.

38 W. Hudson and J. C. Tingey, (eds), *Records of the City of Norwich (RCN)*, (Norwich, 1906-1910), II, 31-32 (xviii). For the context, R. G. Wilson and C. Rawcliffe (eds), *Medieval Norwich* (London, 2006).

39 *RCN*, II, 94-96 (xli).

40 *RCN*, II, 71-72, 85-88 (xxxix).

41 *RCN*, II, 41.

42 *RCN*, II, 59-60 (lxix). B. McRee, 'Peacemaking and its limits in late medieval Norwich', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1994), 831-66.

wine, sturgeon, pike and perch, eels, tench, haddock, plaice, that is, with a concentration on high value and highly symbolic drink and victuals, wine and fresh fish.⁴³

This commensality was thus associated with a singular occasion, not a repetitive ritual or ceremonial feasting. Its purposes were demonstrable: first, to reciprocate for the arbitration of the four local notables; second, to recognize their status through the high status foodstuffs on at least one occasion; and finally, but not least, to cement a reconciliation between the civic elite and the representatives of the rest of the communality. The commensality had been occasioned by disruption and dispute and the intention was the restoration of harmony. We can therefore note that it accords with a functionalist interpretation, but not with the structural concomitant of repetition and iteration at significant times.⁴⁴

A more sumptuous civic feast was organized in 1445-46 on the occasion of the installation of bishop Walter.⁴⁵ The content of the meal was more extravagant than the earlier commensal episode. Once again the commensal event celebrated a specific occasion; it belonged to a contingent cycle at wide intervals rather than regularized frequency. The occasion highlights also two of the characteristics which Paul Freedman has specified as 'negative' aspects of commensality: hierarchy and excess. His comments are much to my chagrin, as they steal some of my thunder, but I shall attempt not only to expand on his conclusions, but to extend them into new possibilities.

If we address the feasts of 1397-98 and 1445-46, we can detect elements of competitive hospitality. On the first occasion, the citizens projected their status to the guests through their expenditure, designed to impress their position as equals or even superiors, in their quest for the jurisdiction of a mayoralty. On the second occasion, the civic feast again represented the dignity of the city and also the bishop. The mayoralty obtained, however, the two jurisdictions – secular city and see

43 M. Montanari, *The Culture of Food*, trans. C. Ipsen (Oxford, 1996), 28-9, 78-91 ('nutritional ideologies' at p. 88); C. M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, and T. Waldron, (eds), *Food in Medieval England. Diet and Nutrition* (Oxford, 2006).

44 For recent consideration of Douglas and Lévi-Strauss, Jones, *Feast*, 8-12.

45 *RCN*, II, 70 (xciv).

– were symbolically competing competencies.⁴⁶ Freedman is sceptical about the potential for the potlatch in medieval feasts, but there are some resonances. 'Anthropological approaches to gift-giving and such competitive generosity as is enshrined in the Pacific Coast Indians' "potlatch" are useful in understanding implications of excess among European aristocrats, but not really as pertaining to the role of food which, unlike the potlatch presents, is an ephemeral offering. Food is a common but nevertheless peculiar kind of gift.⁴⁷ At issue here seems to be the fungibility of the material of the gift. The potlatch gifts were offered, however, at competitive feasting, where excess of food was characteristic. The sumptuous feasts on these occasions conform to the extravagance of the potlatch, implying at least equality of status. There was an agonistic element to the feast, not least on the accession of a new bishop and the rival jurisdiction posed to the city and the mayor, when the office of mayoralty and its civic implications were still in their infancy.

Mayors, authority and civic meals: the borough of Leicester

In the civic context, the element of voluntarism and social capital was somewhat moderated. Performance of office involved more compulsion, and attendance at the function was absolutely requisite. In this context belongs the annual mayor's feast in boroughs. In Leicester, the mayor's meal extended back to the early fourteenth century, although mayoral status had been achieved by 1250x1252 when the position of the alderman of the gild merchant was translated into the mayoralty.

The background influence for the mayor's meals might have been the repasts provided for visiting dignities. Here, we have to differentiate between *exhennia* (food resources delivered to the visiting dignitaries and officials and shared meals. *Exhennia* consisted of food resources delivered to visiting dignitaries and officials, such as: to the lord King *In uno exhennio* (For a present) bread 10s.

⁴⁶ Rosser, 'Conflict and political community in the medieval town: disputes between clergy and laity in Hereford', in T. R. Slater and Rosser (eds), *The Church in the Medieval Town* (Aldershot, 1998), 20-42.

⁴⁷ Freedman, *op. cit.*, 99.

6d., wine £6 8s. 4d., two ox carcasses £1 8s. 0d., five pigs 15s. 6d.).⁴⁸ Royal provision was a constant demand in Leicester. In 1307-8, the mayor accounted for a *gentaculum* (meal; literally breakfast, first meal of the day) for the assessors of the twentieth and another *gentaculum* for the household servants of the earl of Leicester at the inn of Henry le Mercer.⁴⁹ Since the borough was mediatized, under the symbolic tutelage of the earl of Leicester, provision of meals for external visitors was a common requirement. The expenses of the earl and others *supervenientibus in societate sua* (arriving in his company) on 6 October 1321 involved the usual comestibles of bread and ale, but also large meat, geese, a porker, chickens, partridge, almonds, cloves, ginger, saffron, spice, pears, apples and nuts.⁵⁰ On occasions, provisions were directed to a private meal for visitors.⁵¹ Roger Beler enjoyed a meal of two eels (8d.) because he did not consume meat (*In duobus anguillis pro gentaculo Rogeri Beler quia non comedit carnes viij.d.*); 1s. was expended for Ralph de Lasci, royal valet, and others *ad eorum gentaculum*; wine (8d.) was provided *ad gentaculum* of Robert de Emeldon', chief clerk of the Marshalsea; 1s. 3d. accounted for the *gentaculum* for William le Blond; and wine (6d.) furnished in an inn for the *gentaculum* of William Baret and his retinue.⁵²

The most formative development might, however, have been the requirement for the earl's steward. In 1318-19, the costs of provision for the steward comprised high-status items, especially in the supply of fish: *In morne Haddockes et duro pisce vij.d. In salmone vij.d. In sperlyng' et pisce recenti iiij.d.* (and also other light refreshment: *In figis et raceniis j.d.ob.*).⁵³ Salmon had constantly been offered in gifts and *exhennia*, as in the first extant mayor's account, for the three royal justices Sir P. de Leyc', Sir J. de Diggeby and N. de Warr' each *In uno salmone*, and in the same account, for the

48 Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland BR III/1/1. C. M. Woolgar, 'Gifts of food in late medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 37 (2011), 6-18.

49 M. Bateson (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Leicester (RBL)*, I, (London, 1899), 257, 261.

50 *RBL*, I, 338.

51 BR III/1/15.

52 BR III/1/19 (1323-24); BR III/1/22 (1326-27).

53 ROLLR BR III/1/13:

earl of Leicester *In .ij. salmonibus emptis xx.s.* (£1 for two bought salmon).⁵⁴

In 1320-21, this requirement for a formal meal for the steward and his entourage was institutionalized. Interestingly, the mayor's account represents it as a demand from the steward rather than an offer from the borough.

*Expense pro senescallo Item die martis proxima post festum sancte Lucie Ricardus le Foun senescallus mandauit Maiori quod prouiderat pro gentaculo suo qui uenit cum duobus clericis suis Roberto de Gaddesby Receptore Nicolao le Mercer Henrico Hereward et .v. garcionibus.*⁵⁵

(Steward's costs. On Tuesday after the feast of St Lucy, Richard le Foun, the steward, ordered the Mayor to make provision for his meal; he came with his two clerks, Robert de Gaddesby, the receiver, Nicholas le Mercer, Henry Hereward and five grooms.)

Thenceforth the steward's meal was a regular expectation. A meal was required for the steward after the second court leet.⁵⁶ Thus in 1323-24, the costs of the *gentaculum senescalli* were located at the court after All Saints, amounting in total to 9s. 1½d., since the congregation at the meal included not only his clerks, but others, the food consisting of bread, wine, ale, meat, hens in bread, fowl, brawn and geese.⁵⁷ The fare at the steward's meal in 1332-33 was similar: bread (1s.), 7¼ gallons of wine (3s. 7½d.), ale (2s. 4½d.), meat (1s. 9½d.), geese (2s.), capons (9d.), chicks (1s. 9d.), eggs (4d.), tripe (3d.), 2½ lbs of almonds with ginger (8d.), mace and cloves (4d.), saffron (4d.), brawn (4d.), and fowl baked in bread (3½d.).⁵⁸

Item in expensis Hugonis de Hauerburg' senescalli et Willelmi de Baggeworthe receptoris domini gentantium cum Maiore die martis in festo sancte Margarete [sc. of Scotland]. (For the costs of Hugh de Hauerburg, the steward, and William de Baggeworthe, the lord's receiver,

54 BR/III/1.

55 BR III/1/4.

56 *RBL*, I, 345 (1323).

57 BR III/1/19.

58 BR III/1/24.

dining with the Mayor on Tuesday in the feast of St Margaret).

By 1333-34, the mayor arranged a sequence of meals with the steward and his officers. One meal organized by the mayor in that year was attended by the steward, half a dozen named burgesses and other un-named burgesses and four under-bailiffs, the provisions similar to previous years.⁵⁹

Item in expensis Senescalli Willelmi de Cloune Johannis Leuerich' Ricardi Leuerich' Radulphi de Burton' Galfridi de Kent' Willelmi de Gouteby et aliorum proborum hominum et quatuor subballiuorum gentancium cum Maiore die mercurii in festo predicto. (For the costs of the steward, William de Cloune, John Leuerich, Richard Leuerich, Ralph de Burton, Geoffrey de Kent, William de Gouteby and other goodmen and four under-bailiffs dining with the Mayor...):

bread 7½d., 3½ gallons of wine 1s. 9d., ale 10d., herring 6d., fish and eels 1s., apples, pears and nuts 2d.

The mayor in this year began to hold a meal for the Jurats at his presentation to the steward, a smaller affair costing merely 1s.⁶⁰

In expensis Maioris Balliui et plurimorum Juratorum gentancium ad Tabernam quando Maior presentatus fuit coram Senescallo ad Curiam domini Comitis. (For costs of the Mayor, bailiff and several Jurats dining at the ordinary when the Mayor was presented before the steward at the lord earl's court).

Another business meal with the earl's steward and receiver was conducted in that year at midsummer, to the tune of 7s. 9d.

Item in expensis Senescalli receptoris et Juratorum gentancium cum Maiore die Martis proxima ante festum Natiuitatis sancti Johannis Baptiste vij.s. ix.d. ut patet per particulas alibi annexas.

(7s. 9d. for the costs of the steward, receiver and Jurats dining with the Mayor on Tuesday

⁵⁹ BR III/1/25.

⁶⁰ BR III/1/25.

before the Nativity of St John the Baptist ...).⁶¹

In the following year, it was determined that eight should comprise the number of Jurats at the large repast with the steward, but with other burgesses in attendance. Correspondingly, the steward's entourage seems to have expanded.⁶²

Item in expensis Senescalli Rogeri de Belgrae Justiciariorum de pace Receptoris Gilberti Forestarii et eorum clericorum et garcionum et viij Juratorum ville Leic' et aliorum proborum hominum gentancium cum Maiore quando Maior presentatus fuit in Curia domini Comitis (For the costs of the steward, Roger de Belgrae, the justices of the peace, the receiver, Gilbert the Forester, and their clerks and grooms and eight Leicester Jurats and other goodmen dining with the Mayor when the Mayor was presented in the lord earl's court):

bread 1s. 6d., ten gallons of wine 5s., forty gallons of ale 3s. 4d., beef 6d., piglets 1s. 8d., geese 2s., doves 8d., partridge and fowl 1s. 6d., eggs 6d., saffron 1s., hens 2s. (For the hens baked in bread: *Item in pasto et furnagio earundem in Stipendio cocorum reparantium commest' xij.d*). This roll contains expenses only. BR III/1/27 comprises the full account, repeating the item, with some variation, allocating the cost as 34s. 2d. for the meal.

Item in expensis Hugonis de Hauerburg' Senescalli Honoris Leyc' et Gilberti Forestarii et eorum clericorum et Garcionum et octo Juratorum ville Leyc' et aliorum proborum hominum de Communitate gentancium cum Maiore quando presentatus fuit in Curia Comitis.

(In costs for Hugh de Hauerberg, steward of Leicester Honour, and Gilbert the Forester, and their clerks and grooms, and 8 Jurats of Leicester, and other goodmen of the 'community', dining with the mayor when he (the mayor) was presented in the earl's court)

Perhaps significantly in this year, the mayor, John Martyn, first claimed a fee of 13s. 4d. for salmon, a foodstuff commensurate with high status: *Item petit allocacionem pro feodo suo de salmone quod*

⁶¹ BR III/1/25.

⁶² BR III/1/26 (1334-35).

concessum fuit ei per assensum tocius communitatis xiiij.s. iij.d. (He asks an allowance of 13s. 4d. for his salmon fee which was granted him by the whole 'community's consent).⁶³ The salmon was claimed in all subsequent accounts rendered by mayors.

By 1335-36, the expense for the meal for the steward at the presentation of the mayor had increased to well over £2.⁶⁴

Inde computat in expensis et liberatis videlicet in uno gentaculo dato Hugoni de Hauerburg' senescallo honoris Leyc' et receptori domini Comitis Balliuo ville Leyc' et plurimorum [sic] Jur' Leyc' et aliorum [sic] de curia Comitis gentanc' cum Maiore ad domum suam quando Maior fuit presentatus ad proximam Curiam domini Comitis post festum sancti Michaelis secundum consuetudinem ville xlvj.s. j.d. (He accounts for £2 6s. 1d. for costs and payments for a meal allowed Hugh de Hauerburg, the steward of the Honour of Leicester, and the lord earl's receiver, the bailiff of Leicester, and several Leicester Jurats and others from the earl's court dining with the Mayor at his house when the Mayor was presented at the earl's next court after Michaelmas according to the town's custom).

The cost fluctuated, however, diminishing to 18s. 4½d. in 1338-39, but increased again to 35s. 2d. in 1343-44 and £2 in 1346-47.⁶⁵

Item computat in uno gentaculo dato Simoni Pakeman Senescallo Honoris Leyc' et Juratis et aliis probis hominibus dicte ville quando admissus fuit [i.e. the mayor] in Curia domini Comitis Lanc' ad officium Maioratus conseruandum ut patet per parcelas super comptum liberatas xxxv.s. ij.d. (He accounts for £1 15s. 2d. for a repast allowed Simon Pakeman, steward of the Honour of Leicester, and the Jurats and goodmen of the town when the Mayor was admitted to maintain the office of Mayor in the court of the lord duke of Lancaster ...)

63 BR111/1/26.

64 BR111/1/28.

65 BR111/1/31; BR111/1/34 (1343-44); BR111/1/39 (1346-47).

The repast now occurred at the mayor's own house, endowing a personal perspective, and the rationale was now explicitly attributed to borough custom. In 1343-44, the further rationale for the meal was not only the presentment of the mayor to the steward, but the renewal and continuity of the mayoralty, expressing a contractual or even 'feudal' or 'vassal' relationship (homage). The attendance of elite burgesses might have been amplified to include some of the non-Jurat members.

Others of the earl's officialdom received hospitality with the mayor, although at smaller cost, such as Robert de Hungerford, the earl's auditor, his clerk and valets.⁶⁶ An occasional meal for the new steward, Simon Pakeman, with a few of the burghal elite explained an expenditure of a quarter of a mark (3s. 4d.) in 1340-41. The menu consisted of bread, wine, fish, eels, salmon, almonds and butter – high-status foodstuff. Significantly, this meal was authorized expressly by the Jurats, reflecting some attempt to control the mayor's expenditure on entertainment and in general.⁶⁷

The election of the mayor was the occasion for a meal shortly after Michaelmas at which the mayor, along with the newly-elected Jurats and bailiffs, was presented to the earl or his steward as a symbolic act of homage and allegiance.⁶⁸ Perhaps as a consequence of commensality with the steward, the mayor began to entertain other visiting officials and dignitaries rather than simply furnish the provisions for their meal. When justices arrived in 1332-33 for the array of men and materials for the Scottish campaign, the mayor entertained them at a meal himself. Significantly, he included other Jurats of the borough, so that the occasion resembled a civic meal with guests. The menu comprised bread (8d.), wine (4s.), ale (1s.), meat (1s. 6d.), geese (2s. 8d.), fowl (2s.), doves (6d.), chicks (8d.), tripe (4d.), piglets (8d.), eggs (2d.), wastel (½d.), saffron (4d.), brawn (4d.) and heating materials (6d.).⁶⁹

In expensis domini Ricardi de Egebaston' et Rogeri de Aylesbyry Justiciarorum domini Regis de

66 BR III/1/31 (1338-39; cost 3s. 6d.).

67 BR III/1/32 (1340-41); *per assensum Juratorum*.

68 *RBL*, II, ed. Mary Bateson and Helen Stocks (London, 1904), 13 (1333-34), 15, 25 (*gentaculum*, 1335-36), 45, 60.

69 BR III/1/24.

pace ad arrayandum homines versus Scociam gentantium cum Maiore die Lune proxima post festum Sancti Marce Ewangeliste per assensum Johannis <Alsi-superscript> et aliorum Juratis ibidem gentancium. (Costs of the King's justices of the peace, Sir Richard de Egebaston and Roger de Aylesbyry, in impressing men for Scotland, dining with the Mayor on Monday after the feast of St Mark the Evangelist by the agreement of John Alsi and other Jurats dining there).

By that year, it seems to have become a customary practice for the mayor and selected members of the elite to dine with the visitors. In the same year, William le Blount was invited to dine with the significant players in the borough to discuss the borough's fiscal affairs; previously, the borough had seemingly only provided the edible and potable materials.⁷⁰

In expensis domini Willelmi le Blount gentantis ad Tabernam et cum eo plures de communitate super expensis communitatis ... (Costs of Sir William le Blount dining at the ordinary and with him many from the 'community') (total cost 18s. 9d.).

In expensis Johannis [sic] le Blount gentantis ad Tabernam in societate quorundem de communitate die Lune proxima post Hokeday .ij. lagenas et j potellam vini xxj.d. (1s. 9d. for 2 gallons and a potel of wine in the costs of John [sic] le Blount dining at the ordinary in the company of some of the 'community' on Monday after Hockday).⁷¹

In 1335-36, frequent business meals had become necessary. The mayor entertained the steward of the earl's *hospicium* and other external dignitaries, including John le Blount, Henry de Wynton', Edmund Waldeboef, Geoffrey de Walkote, Mr John le Keu, and Ralph the clerk of Bertram *de Panetria* on the Sunday after the Invention of Holy Cross. Before their departure the clerk and sergeant of the marshalry and their retinue were entertained by the mayor with two other former mayors (John le Marewe and Richard Leverich) with others specifically with the consent of certain Jurats.⁷² (The

70 BR III/1/24.

71 BR III/1/25 (1333-34)

72 BR III/1/28.

named persons *et aliorum de Curia et de villa Leyc' gentancium cum Maiore ante eorum recessum per assensum quorundem Juratorum*. (and others of the court and town dining with the Mayor before their departure by the agreement of certain Jurats)). Local lords were feasted in an ordinary by a few of the burghal elite, for which the mayor accounted.

Item in uno gentaculo dato domino Willelmo le Blount domino Nicholao Verdon' In presencia Willelmi de Cloune Ricardi Leuerich et aliorum gentancium ad Tabernam post festum Sancti Petri (For a meal provided for Sir William le Blount, Sir Nicholas de Verdon in the company of William de Cloune, Richard Leuerich and others dining at the ordinary after the feast of St Peter).⁷³

The following year, Roger la Zouche was treated to a business meal in mid summer to discuss his assistance in a fiscal matter (*pro auxilio suo Habendo versus Thes' domini Regis*. (to have his assistance against the lord King's treasurer/treasury)).⁷⁴ In 1338-39, a small affair (judging by the low cost) was occasioned for Roger de Boudon, his clerk and grooms, as the commission to select twenty archers.⁷⁵ Since the overlord of the borough intervened in its internal affairs, business meals became a requisite. Ten principal burgesses discussed the maintenance of streets (Humberstone Gate and Belgrave Gate) in the borough with the lord's sergeant in 1344-45, subsequently directed to make good the roads.⁷⁶

Item in uno gentaculo dato Waltero de Wyntre seruianti domini Comitis Derby' venienti apud Leyc' pro negocio domini pro reparacione viarum in Humbirstongate et Belegrauegate in presencia Gilberti le Auener Willelmi Wareyn Ricardi Leuerich' Johannis le Receyuour Henrici de Barkeby Willelmi de Dunstaple Willelmi Geryn Rogeri de Claybrok' Willelmi de Wakefeld et Ricardi le Cu et aliorum de societate dicti Walteri viijs. ij.d. (8s. 2d. for a meal provided for Walter de Wyntre, the lord earl of Derby's sergeant, coming to Leicester for the lord's business

73 BR111/1/28.

74 BR111/1/29.

75 BR111/1/31.

76 BR111/1/36 (1344-45).

for the repair of Humberstone Gate and Belgrave Gate in the company of Gilbert le Auener, William Wareyn, Richard Leuerich, John le Receyuour, Henry de Barkeby, William de Dunstaple, William Geryn, Roger de Claybrok, William de Wakefeld, and Richard le Cu and others of Walter's company).

By the early 1350s, perhaps as a result of the depredations of the first plague, the steward was dining with the mayor thrice in the accounting year, only once when the oath was undertaken.⁷⁷

In expensis Johannis de Freland et aliorum iantancium cum Maiore quando fecit iuramentum suum apud castrum (Costs of John de Freland and others dining with the Mayor when he took his oath at the castle), (3s. 6d.); *Item in expensis Johannis de Freland Senescalli Thome de le Groue Johannis Receptoris Willelmi de Wakefeld et aliorum comedencium ad domum Maioris prime septimane [sic] quadragesime* (Costs of John de Freland, steward, Thomas de le Groue, John the Receiver, William de Wakefeld and others dining at the Mayor's house in the first week in Lent) (10s. 1d.); *Et ij.s. in expensis Johannis de Freland iantantis cum Maiore alia vice.* (2s. in costs of John de Freland dining with the Mayor on another occasion).

Unsurprisingly, the mayor inaugurated a meal for the Jurats and others of the civic community in 1340-41 on the Tuesday before the Invention of Holy Cross at a cost of £1 10s. 8d.

Idem computat in expensis unius gentaculi dati Juratis ville et pluribus de communitate die Martis proxima post festum Inuencionis Sancte Crucis xxx.s. (He accounts for £1 10s. 0d. for costs of a meal provided for the Jurats and many from the 'community' on Tuesday after the feast of the Invention of Holy Cross).⁷⁸

The mayor's meal thus pertains to the category of invented traditions which seem to be of considerable importance in the later middle ages.⁷⁹ Although the transition to a mayoral office was achieved in

⁷⁷ BR111/1/41 (1351-52).

⁷⁸ *RBL*, II, p. 47= BR111/1/32:

⁷⁹ *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, 1983).

1250x1252, there is ostensibly no evidence for a mayoral meal until almost a century later – although the argument *ex silencio* is inconclusive. In 1361-62, the mayor received a 'fee' of £2 for his annual meal, suggesting that the repast had become normalized and institutionalized (*In feodo supradicti Maioris pro gentaculo suo xl.s.* (£2 for the Mayor's fee for his meal)).⁸⁰

Mayors, meals and authority: in general

The first indication of mayoral celebration at Exeter occurred at a similar time as in Leicester, in the early fourteenth century, although the format was rather different. Here, bread and wine were delivered to the new mayor and the new stewards and to the outgoing mayor and stewards on election day. These officers, city officials and elite burgesses also received bread and wine at Christmas and Easter by custom.⁸¹

If we examine this concept more closely, we might associate the invention of tradition with a search for authority. The vicissitudes of the later middle ages had removed some of the certainties of economy, society, culture and politics. Elevating the position of the mayor reinstated some institutional authority—a re-establishment of authority. The institution of the office of mayor in Norwich in the early fifteenth century is thus both the reception of affiliation—the introduction of an office established elsewhere—but also a desire to reconstitute authority. Such restitution comes, however, at a price—the risk of aggrandizement and oligarchy. The initial contests at Norwich illustrate this fine balance; the 'invention of tradition' can inherently promote discord.⁸²

Fiscal rectitude was propagated in Southampton in 1488 with the commencement of the books of fines, the contingent income of the mayor. Although previously jotted as memoranda by the mayors, Thomas Overay regularized accounting and auditing of the mayor's charge and discharge.⁸³

80 BR11/1/47; BR11/1/50-55.

81 *The Receivers' Accounts of the City of Exeter, 1304-1353*, ed. M. M. Rowe and J. M. Draisey (Devon and Cornwall Record Society 32, 1989), passim.

82 M. Richardson, 'Introduction', in Richardson (ed.), *Georges Bataille, The Absence of Myth. Writings on Surrealism* ((2nd edn, London, 2006), 11-13.

83 C. Butler (ed.), *The Book of Fines: The Annual Accounts of the Mayors of Southampton Volume I 1488-1540*

We can deduce from these interventions that the mayoralty was in danger of becoming an over-mighty subject within the borough. The office needed to be constitutionally limited. For example, in the borough of Leicester between 1251 and 1328, only twenty-one men had served in the office. The last in this sequence, John Alsy, occupied the office for almost a decade in four separate terms. Between 1328 and 1389, twenty-seven men were promoted to the mayoralty in Leicester. By the late fourteenth century, however, the monopoly of the office was disrupted by convention. Even so, some men advanced to the office in several years, as Ralph Humberston in 1415, 1421-22, and 1429-30. William Dalton the younger persisted as mayor through 1454-57. We can either conclude that there was a dearth of men of sufficient gravity and authority or that an oligarchy already monopolized the office. In the fifteenth century, it is possible that the office was filled by Humberston and Dalton in crisis years. The replacement of the mayor's financial control by the two chamberlains in the late fourteenth century (1376-77) implies the aggrandizement of the office. The provision by the chamberlains of £2 towards the mayor's annual repast thus resembles less a perquisite or contribution to the office than an attempt to limit the sumptuous occasion as a projection of the mayor's status.

Progress to the mayoralty remained in many urban places a contentious procedure, as at Norwich. The constitutional arrangements varied from one borough to another, ranging from selection to election, but even then by a narrow franchise. At Southampton, the exiting mayor nominated two burgesses for appointment.⁸⁴ Efforts were made in the late fifteenth century to limit the dominance of the office. Usually, as in an ordinance for Carlisle in 1487, this restriction involved prohibition of the retiring mayor to hold another office for a defined period, in Carlisle three years.⁸⁵ Despite this convention in most boroughs, it was not unusual for some mayors to serve in crisis times, as noted above, for several years, as Thomas Overay for three successive years in Southampton, he belonging to

(Southampton Record Society, 41, n.d.), p. xiii.

84 Butler, *ibid.*, xi.

85 H. Summerson, *Medieval Carlisle. The City and the Borders from the Late Eleventh to the Mid-Sixteenth Century* (Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society Extra Series 25, 1993), 523.

the third generation of this family to be appointed to the office.⁸⁶ Simultaneously, more boroughs, especially those formerly mesne boroughs, were seeking to refine their constitutions to have a mayoralty.⁸⁷ Thus, Bridgwater acquired a new charter in 1468 replacing the former provosts by a mayor, two bailiffs and the burgesses.⁸⁸ Undoubtedly, such constitutional re-arrangements were intended to elevate the dignity of the place in external relations and perceptions, but equally invested enormous significance in one office, not only as titular and symbolic head, but also with material power.

The attempt to control the mayor's display was not always successful. In 1493-94, the chamberlains of the borough of Nottingham recorded: 'And so ther is lost at that dinner clerly' 11s.⁸⁹ The chamberlains had expended 31s. 8d. on the actual occasion, but only recouped 14s. at the dinner and 6s. 8d. from the mayor's fishing at the pools. The mayor's fishing, incidentally, constituted another invented tradition, a civic ludic occasion combined with the mayor's dinner. The mayor of Nottingham's dinner in this instance consisted of the usual bread and ale, with additionally ling, turbot and salmon, pepper and saffron, ginger, small raisins, sugar, mustard, pike, nuts, browet, flour and salt, not extravagant, but marked by fresh fish appropriate to official status.

Although the city of Coventry had ordained chamberlains to receive some of the city's finances, the mayor remained a principal accounting officer. In 1427, the mayor's receipts about doubled the amount directed to the chamberlains. The power of the mayor was undiminished.⁹⁰ The control over material resources of some mayors reaffirmed hierarchical control of urban society. The mayor's dinner was a concomitant symbolic confirmation of that authority. Control over resources and the festive

86 Butler, *op. cit.*, xiii-xiv.

87 M. Weinbaum, *The Incorporation of Boroughs* (Manchester, 1937).

88 T. B. Dilks (ed.), *Bridgwater Borough Archives 1200-1377* (Somerset Record Society 48, 1933), xxvii; R. W. Dunning and T. D. Tremlett (eds), from transcriptions by T. B. Dilks, *Bridgwater Borough Archives V 1468-1485* (SRS 70, 1971), xi.

89 W. Stephenson (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, III (Nottingham, 1885), 279-80.

90 M. D. Harris (ed.), *The Coventry Leet Book; or Mayor's Register: Containing the Records of the City Court Leet or View of Frankpledge, A.D. 1420-1555, with Divers Other Matters* (Early English Text Society, 1907), I, 109.

occasion reduced risk and uncertainty in urban politics, in addition to flexibility of manoeuvre, which is a concomitant in many cases.⁹¹

By this time—the late fifteenth century—mayor's dinners were universally organized in boroughs. With reference to Coventry, Charles Phythian-Adams opined of the mayor's dinner in St Mary's Hall in Coventry: 'The tradition of hospitality by a newly-elected superior lay at the heart of the late-medieval social system...'⁹² Such had become the tradition at Exeter in the later middle ages, the outgoing mayor furnishing a feast for prominent officers at his own expense on the day of elections of officers.⁹³ After the election of a new mayor at Bristol, two dinners ensued, one for the new mayor and the majority of the council, the other for the previous mayor with a smaller number of officers. 'This ceremony repeated in a symbolic way the transfer of authority from the outgoing to the incoming mayor', according to David Harris Sacks.⁹⁴ Thereupon, the two mayors combined to lead a procession up the hill to St Michael's church. After the benediction, all the dignitaries and officers returned downhill to the new mayor's house for 'cheerful hospitality', the reuniting of the official community through commensality.⁹⁵ The mayor's position at the head of the apex of the urban hierarchy thus demanded a celebration on the occasion of this incoming office-holder. From the perspective of political theory, however, there is a distinct resemblance to the exercise of patriarchal authority: the mayor's authority over urban society, analogous, perhaps, to the *pater familias*.⁹⁶ Despite earlier attempts to reduce the financial dominance of the mayor, the general status of the mayoral office had, by the late fifteenth century, become enhanced symbolically as the head of the community, reflected in seats of power and the obligations of the clothing (properly-attired entourage of the other aldermen and councillors)

91 P. Marris, *The Politics of Uncertainty. Attachment in Private and Public Life* (London, 1996), 87-88; M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power. Volume 1. A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760* (Cambridge, 1986).

92 *Desolation of a City. Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979), 263.

93 Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade*, 105-7.

94 *The Widening Gate: Bristol and the Atlantic Economy, 1450-1700* (Berkeley, CA. 1991), 177.

95 Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed.), *The Maire of Bristowe Is Kalendar*, (Camden new series v, 1872), 74.

96 Reynolds, *op. cit.*; Rigby and Ewan, *op. cit.*.

towards the mayor.⁹⁷ Attending the mayor assumed some of the proportions of waiting on rulers and governors, a propensity which originated in the late middle ages but reached its apogee in the succeeding centuries.⁹⁸ (Some boroughs had mayor's courts as well as the portmoot or borough court, for example, Exeter and Oxford, and Bristol, which reinforced mayoral supremacy). It is, of course, impossible to differentiate what contributed to the dignity of the office and thus civic society in general from what elevated the authority and power of the mayor. The status of the mayor was also emphasized for the purpose of external relationships, but that enhancement also elevated the internal authority of the mayor. Conflict about oligarchy and urban social and political hierarchy in the later middle ages heightened the significance of the mayoral repast, both in projecting mayoral superiority but also by displaying the divisions of that hierarchy.⁹⁹ The mayor's dinner can only then be elucidated in the wider context of mayoral authority, including patriarchal responsibility and discipline, and the imperative for hospitality.

Rhetorical display and dissent

The mayor's dinner did not only constitute an occasion or event, but an exhibition or spectacle, involving the rhetoric of display.¹⁰⁰ The display was organized to persuade conformity amongst those convened, to reaffirm their position within the hierarchy, but also to invite them to accept it. The dinner was a demonstration with ostentation designed to persuade, at which the participants were also observers, at once players in a symbolic drama and the audience.¹⁰¹ The event was managed epideictically to limit the possibilities of interpretation, to restrict the potential meaning, and to impose

97 For example, *The Maire of Bristowe Is Kalendar*, 70-1; C. Beattie, A. Maslakovic, and S. Rees Jones (eds), *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe* (International Medieval Research 12, Turnhout, 2003), esp. Rees Jones, 'The household and political power'.

98 R. Tittler, 'Seats of honor, seats of power: the symbolism of public seating in the English urban community, c.1560-1620', *Albion* 24 (1992), 205-23. *The Maire of Bristowe Is Kalendar*, 84-5.

99 Thompson (ed.), *op. cit.*

100 L. J. Prelli (ed.), *Rhetorics of Display* (Columbia, SC, 2006).

101 Prelli, 'Rhetorics of display: an introduction', in *Rhetorics of Display*, 1, 7-9.

a frame of reference¹⁰² The visual display of the proceedings was deliberately visible. The occasion was also a performance, in which the action demarcated and defined, explored in the case of superior seating by Tittler on the lines of Geertz's hermeneutic anthropology, but the performative aspects surely extend back into the late middle ages.¹⁰³

The visual interpretation of the scene coalesces with the politics of place, seating arrangements. In the observation of the hierarchical organization of the meal, each participant was invited to recognize his place, higher and lower.¹⁰⁴ Whilst each participant might have a frame of reference, a highly personal mental map, about the positioning of particular friends, peers, and even competitors, a visual map was also imposed, with the authority of the mayor and close council at the apex, reinforcing the political organization and the status of the incumbent personnel.

There are two other possibilities which we might countenance: 'whatever is revealed through display simultaneously conceals alternative [sic] possibilities'.¹⁰⁵ If the occasion is a text, a tableau, or a static picture, it might be received in diverse ways.¹⁰⁶ The first potentiality is for dissent, which is difficult because its visibility may be occluded by the ownership of the record, but occasional memoranda refer to ameracements for 'reviling' officers.¹⁰⁷ Dissent also takes place *sotto voce*. It is whispered in the background, at the lower end of the table; the festivity might liberate speech as the carnivalesque impinged on formality.¹⁰⁸ The other potential aberration is a contest for power over the organization of the ceremony.¹⁰⁹ The jostling for position amongst craft guilds about stations of the cross in late-medieval Corpus Christi drama, is indicative of the potential, but probably not apposite in the

102 Prelli, *ibid.*, 15.

103 Tittler, *op. cit.*

104 J. Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge, 1982), 141-3.

105 Prelli, *op. cit.*, 2.

106 Prelli, *op. cit.*, 17; P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing. The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY, 2001); W. Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York, 2000).

107 Butler, *op. cit.*, 57, 73, 80, 87, 90.

108 M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA, 1965).

109 Harrison, *op. cit.*; also O. A. C. Anigbo, 'Commensality as cultural performance: the struggle for leadership in an Igbo village', in D. Parkin, L. Caplan, and H. Fisher (eds), *The Politics of Cultural Performance* (Oxford, 1996), 101-14.

case of mayor's dinners, over which there was more restricted and unitary control.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, we might suspect some cause of the asymmetry between the incoming and the outgoing mayor's dinners in say, Bristol, which might have had origins in power plays which became institutionalized.

We have, of course, commenced skating on very thin ice. Arguments *ex silencio* stretch credulity. Sometimes the analogies are juxtapositions of no great value. To speculate is not necessarily to accumulate. Like Susan Reynolds or William Miller, however, we might conceive that there are certain essentials of human nature, but emotional responses might still vary, affective or critical.¹¹¹ Mayors through their dinners attempted to symbolically constrain any dissent from the hierarchical disposition of the borough constitution. The strategy deployed the mechanics of material display to impress and the rhetorical force of homology and harmony to limit perceptions. Occasions contain the seeds of their own inversion and subversion. Events also provide opportunities for competition over control and organization. When power becomes seemingly excessive in its context, interventions are made by peers towards constraint.

What is evident, nevertheless, is that, if the occasion is indeed read as a text, context was paramount. First, it is necessary to reinsert the political into ritual activity, in terms of the power to organize, but also the possibility for the accretion of some change. The event of the mayor's meal at Leicester illustrates the political influence in the introduction of the occasion and its manipulation. Sewell's 'thin coherence' might well explain the general acquiescence in a general prospectus, although, as Rosser rightly contends, an action-based account would take into account what each participant additionally expected from the event. For those attending, there was a limit of interpretation of this

110 S. Beckwith, *Christ's Body. Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London, 1993).

111 W. I. Miller, *Faking It* (Cambridge, 2003); Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA, 1997); Miller, *Humiliation: and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); S. Reynolds, 'Social mentalities and the case of medieval scepticism', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 1 (1991), 21-41. T. J. Scheff, 'Elias, Freud and Goffman: shame as the master emotion', in S. Loyal and S. Quilley (eds), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge, 2004), 229-42.

textual analogy.¹¹² Parameters existed which ruled out pure contingency; that may be no more than to state that 'community' (and commensality) has always been normative rather than simply descriptive, in demanding conformity to norms, *pace* Cohen.¹¹³ The medieval mayor's feast does not really allow for the vast polysemic understandings associated with the Jain *puja*. In the end, Geertz's 'thick description' might well lead to Sewell's 'thin coherence'. It is still necessary, however, to reinsert the politics into ritual and, especially, ceremonial, occasions, in terms of their organization and inherent competition for precedence, and in the case of meals and feasts, the spread on display and the seating pattern (and, again, precedence). As concerns the culinary content of the meal, social relations could just as easily be maintained and extended with simple fare. What mattered was the deference to the dignity of the participants and also non-altruistic munificence – tending to excess and competition.

112 Iser, *Range of Interpretation*.

113 A. P. Cohen, 'Epilogue', in V. Amit (ed.), *Realizing Community: Concepts, Social Relationships and Sentiments* (London, 2002), 169.