

Eating and Drinking



Sweeter than bee-bread

SOME OF THIS *wordhord's* gems sparkle with familiarity and have remained much the same for a thousand years. Perhaps you can guess what kinds of foods *æg*, *butere* and *meolc* are. Other words are trickier until you know how they're pronounced, like *cȳse* (CHUE-zuh) and *hunig* (HUN-ih). We use the word 'bread' now instead of *hlāf*, but we still use *hlāf's* descendant 'loaf'.

In early medieval England, the go-to meal for most people would have been *hlāf* and something to eat with it (*butere* perhaps, or a dense, crumbly *cȳse*). The *hlāf* would not resemble modern sandwich bread in any way, not even a crusty rustic loaf. Wheat was quite expensive; it didn't flourish in England's climate and could only be grown in the south. Most people satisfied their hunger with cheaper, hardier grains like rye, barley and oats, or legumes like peas. Even the people wealthy enough to afford wheat flour would probably have mixed it with rye to bulk it out. Rye and barley don't allow for as much rise as wheat, so the bread would have been flat and dense. Whatever rise the bread had would have been achieved with barm (yeast left over from brewing ale) or a sourdough starter (flour and water combined with wild yeast, from either the air or flour).

We take it for granted now, but access to an *ofen* (oven) was rare in early medieval England. Given how much it cost to build an *ofen* and supply it with fuel, a community like a monastery or a village might have one to share, but there certainly would not have been one in each house. Most people would have baked their *hlāf* on a bakestone (a flat stone over a fire or raised hearth) with an inverted pot on top, or on an iron griddle, or even in the embers of a dying cookfire. (Remember to dust the ashes off your bread before eating.) Baking flatbread on a griddle or bakestone would have been the norm in England from the fifth century to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, and even later in some regions. In the early centuries of the Old English period, most of the baking and cooking seems to have taken place in the same room as the sleeping and eating. The *heorþ* (hearth) was so central to a dwelling that the word could stand in metonymically for ‘home’ or ‘household’ (although the alliterative expression ‘hearth and home’ didn’t appear until the nineteenth century).

A common word for the male head of a household was *hlāford*, derived from *hlāf* + *weard* (keeper, guardian), from which we get ‘lord’. Like today’s ‘breadwinner’, the bread-guardian ensured his followers had enough to eat. The female head of a household was the *hlāefdige* (bread-maker, pronounced H’LAV-dih-yuh), from whose humble origins we get today’s far more refined-sounding ‘lady’. While bread-guardian and bread-maker have indelibly marked our language, the *hlāf-æta* (bread-eater) has left less of a trace – perhaps understandably, since they were a dependant, a lowly member of the household who relied on the *hlāford*’s provisions. If *hlāf* was the most common word for bread in Old English, then another was *cyceġ* (little cake, pronounced KUE-chell). We usually think of cakes as sugary deserts, but a ‘cake’ was originally a small, flat sort of bread, rounded in shape, usually hard on both sides from being turned part-way through baking. The *cyceġ* was so ubiquitous that from this word we get modern

English ‘cook’ and ‘kitchen’. ‘Bread’ was present in Old English, but this **brēad** was of such importance that (at least linguistically) it sometimes stood in for ‘food’.

Thanks to this broader definition, **bēo-brēad** (bee-brēad) is not the delicious honeyed loaf you might imagine, but a word meaning ‘bee-food’. The *Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (1898) defines *bēo-brēad* as ‘the pollen of flowers collected by bees and mixed with honey for the food of the larvæ’. *Bēo-brēad*, according to *Bosworth-Toller*, is ‘quite distinct’ from honeycomb or beeswax, with the caveat that sometimes it *could* be honeycomb due to someone’s ‘deficient knowledge of natural history’. Meanwhile, the University of Toronto’s *Dictionary of Old English: A to I* (2018) says that *bēo-brēad* is ‘honeycomb with honey’. Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham, a prolific English writer of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, says in one of his homilies that *bēo-brēad* is honeycomb and beeswax together – although in this instance it feels more like pushing a metaphor. After his resurrection, says Ælfric, Christ consumed roasted fish and ‘honey’s bee-brēad’ (*hunies beobread*): the roasted fish represents his suffering and the bee-brēad his sweet divinity:

Bee-brēad (*beobread*) is of two things: wax (*weaxe*) and honey (*hunie*). Christ is of two substances: divinity with no beginning and humanity with a beginning. He became for us at his passion a roasted fish and at his resurrection bee-brēad of honey (*hunies beobread*).

This occurs in the Gospel of Luke, when Christ requests food after his resurrection. In the Old English translation of Luke, Christ’s disciples offer him fish and *bēo-brēad*, but the original Latin is *favum mellis*, which is usually translated as ‘honeycomb’.

An Old English psalm describes the word of God as *swetran ðonne hunig oððe beobread* (sweeter than honey or bee-brēad). *Bēo-brēad* could

be honeycomb here, but the original Latin version of the psalm refers only to *mel* (honey). *Bēo-brēad* was added to *hunig* in the Old English translation. Is *bēo-brēad* simply another word for honey, or did the translator think the phrase ‘honey or honeycomb’ sounded better than ‘honey’ on its own?

Another theory is that *bēo-brēad* is the viscous, white, glandular secretion of worker bees that is a bee superfood. Immature larvae consume this highly nutritious substance for the first two or three days of their maturation, but only the queen bee gets to consume it throughout her entire life cycle. The substance has been called ‘royal jelly’ since the early nineteenth century, perhaps because it’s food for the queen, and the main reason for the queen’s longevity compared to other bees. While worker bees only live for a few weeks over the summer, queen bees can survive several years. Royal jelly is also consumed by humans around the world. Research has shown it has medicinal properties for humans as well as bees: antioxidant, anti-tumour, anti-inflammatory and anti-ageing. When Christ is offered royal jelly to eat, he is presented with the best of the food, not mere honey or honeycomb but *bēo-brēad*, a food valued for its healing properties as well as its sweetness.

Whether it is honeycomb or royal jelly or something else entirely, *bēo-brēad* appears in a remedy for *smēga-wyrm* in *Bald’s Leechbook* (tenth century). A leechbook is an Old English medical text, often containing advice on diagnosis and treatment as well as recipes for herbal-, animal- and mineral-based medications. A literal translation of *smēga-wyrm* is ‘burrowing worm’, indicating how this particular parasite penetrates the skin and works its way into the body. The remedy instructs the patient to consume new cheese, wheat bread and *bēo-brēad* – simple enough as long as you know what *bēo-brēad* is. (The next step is, however, slightly more complex: burn a man’s skull to ashes and then apply it topically using a pipe.)

Another food word that appears to relate to bees is *bēon-broþ*. Indeed, the word has been translated as ‘bee-broth’, possibly another name for *medu* (mead), an alcoholic drink made from fermented honey. To me, a reference to mead as ‘bee-broth’ seems far too poetic in a remedy for an inflamed liver. The remedy instructs the patient to take an emetic and then drink nothing but *bēon-broþ* for a week. It is possible that the leechbook is recommending an alcohol-only diet for a liver-sick patient, but it seems far more likely that *bēon-broþ* is really *bēan-broþ* (bean broth), a warming, protein-rich food that’s easy to consume. *Brīw*, a pottage or thick paste made from grains, meal or beans, would have been a dietary staple, and the word appears most frequently in leechbooks. *Bēon-broþ* may be an alternative spelling that appears to turn a simple *brīw* into something boozier.

Although *hunig* was fermented to make *medu*, it was primarily used as a food sweetener. Sugar was not an option; there is not even a word for ‘sugar’ in Old English because it was virtually unknown in Western Europe. Sugar was occasionally used medicinally in parts of Europe, but it does not appear in any English medical texts of the time. The word ‘sugar’ did not enter English until the thirteenth century, via French from Arabic *sukkar*. While stereotypical depictions of medieval peasants often have blackened, rotten teeth, archaeological evidence shows tooth decay to be far less of a problem than in later centuries, probably due to the lack of sugar.

Undern-food and morning-drink

Most people in England in the early medieval period were peasants, growing what they needed to eat and eating most of what they grew. If you were rich you might be able to import spices and consume greater

quantities of meat, the main meats being chicken and pork. The word 'chicken' hasn't changed much from Old English *cicēn* (CHIH-chen); both words can refer to either the animal or the meat. 'Pork', however, didn't enter English until later (Middle English 'pork', 'porke' or 'porc'), with the influence of French. Old English *swīn* (pig, swine) refers to the animal as well as the meat, but with the influence of the Normans came words like 'pork' and 'beef' that were used to indicate the meat specifically. When the animal was still on the farm it had a humble English name, but once it got to the table French provided a loftier label.

While modern English 'meat' does come from the Old English word *mete*, the latter would have included beans, bread, cheese, fruit, or really any kind of food. In Middle English 'mete' still referred generally to food or a meal, but it was used in compounds to indicate specific types of foods: 'flesh-mete' (meat), 'whit-mete' (dairy products, like milk, cheese, butter and eggs), 'est-mete' (delicacies or 'dainty' food), and so on. Around 1300 'mete' alone sometimes meant animal flesh, and by the Early Modern period Shakespeare was using 'meat' in both the general and specific senses. In *Coriolanus* 'the grace 'fore meat' is the prayer before a meal, but in *The Comedy of Errors* Dromio of Syracuse says the meat wants basting, expressing concern that it will make Antipholus choleric. (It was once believed that dry, overdone meat would cause an excess of the humour called choler, which made people hot-tempered.) The original definition of 'meat' as simply food is now considered archaic, though you can still find it in places like *Lallans*, the journal of the Scots Language Society whose mission is 'tae forder an uphaud the Scots leid'. Food-'meat' took a litigious turn in 2019, when Missouri law actually censored the more general 'meat' definition, threatening with criminal sanctions those companies who sold vegan, plant-based meat substitutes as 'meat'.

'Meat' is an example of semantic narrowing, the process of a word

acquiring a less general, more specialised meaning over time. Most languages undergo semantic narrowing, usually because a particular definition for a word begins to be used more frequently than others. In the case of ‘meat’, people must have used the word specifically for animal flesh more and more frequently until a point in time when ‘meat’ sounded strange when used for any other sense. So although the word *morgen-mete* (*morgen* ‘morning’ + *mete*), or ‘morning-meat’, looks like bacon and sausages, a more accurate translation is ‘morning-food’, or what we’d call ‘breakfast’.

Bacon in Old English is not *morgen-mete* but *spic* (SPITCH), a word related to ‘speck’, a prosciutto-like meat from northern Italy. The earliest citation of this Italian speck in English is relatively recent (1981), but ‘speck’ entered the English vocabulary via Dutch as early as 1633. Over the centuries it has always had the definition of ‘fatty meat’: mostly pork but sometimes whale or even hippopotamus bacon. Old English *spic* fell out of use during the later Middle Ages, replaced by Middle English ‘lard’ and ‘bacoun’. While today a larder is a cupboard or room for storing food in general, it was once intended specifically for meat storage.

The intriguing compound *offrung-spic* (offering-bacon or sacrifice-bacon) is an example of a hapax legomenon (or just hapax), a word that appears only once in extant literature. The one occurrence of *offrung-spic* is in an Old English translation of the Second Book of Maccabees, in which King Antiochus of Greece takes pleasure in persecuting his Jewish subjects, trying to force them to renounce their faith. Jewish faith forbids the faithful from eating pork, so mandatory bacon consumption was apparently a favourite method of torture. The fact that this pork is intended as a sacrificial offering to pagan idols makes the torture that much worse for the faithful. Eleazar, an elderly Jewish teacher of law, refuses to eat (or even pretend to eat) the king’s pork, especially not *offrung-spic*, and is flogged to death for his

steadfast faith and resolve. Afterwards, the old teacher is celebrated by the Jews as a holy man and martyr. In any case, *offrung-spic* is clearly an undesirable option for *morgen-mete*.

Another 'breakfast' word is ***undern-mete*** (*undern*-food). Like *morgen*, ***undern*** is morning, and according to *Bosworth-Toller* it is specifically nine o'clock in the morning. Nine o'clock seems rather late for breakfast. Did it really take hard-working peasants that long to get out of bed in the morning? Probably not. We have limited information about how lay people lived in early medieval England but, given the amount of work to be done each day, they would have wanted to get an early start, as soon as there was enough light to see by. There is more information about how people of religious vocations lived, the monks and nuns, since rules were written to guide them in the use of their time. Monks were expected to get up in the wee hours of the morning (two or three o'clock) for prayers. They might have a bit more sleep after that, but there were more prayers at first light. As a monk or nun you could expect one or two meals a day, depending on the time of year. In the summer you might have dinner, the main meal, shortly after midday and a second, smaller meal after evening prayers. During the winter, fewer hours of daylight gave you less time to do all your work, so you could expect a single meal served a bit later in the afternoon and perhaps a light snack or glass of wine before bedtime.

Clearly, breakfast was not a full-English, eggs-and-sausage affair at this point in history, so why is there an Old English word for a 9 a.m. meal? *Undern-mete*, in fact, occurs in only a handful of places – it's certainly not common. The places where the word appears are not necessarily in the context of early medieval England. One such occurrence is in *Orosius*, the earliest world history in English, written c.900 and based on an earlier history in Latin. *Orosius* describes the famous Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE, when King Leonidas of Sparta tried

to stop the invasion of Greece by King Xerxes of Persia. The tension mounts on the morning of the battle, when King Leonidas bids his officers, 'Let us now enjoy this breakfast (*undern-mete*) as we should if we are to end up in hell for supper!' Here *undern-mete* is used in retelling a story from a distant time and place. Neither does the word reflect the reality of life in medieval England when it's used to retell scripture. In the Bible, Old English *undern-mete* is used to translate Latin *prandium* (dinner, the main meal of the day). In a parable from the Gospel of Matthew, a king invites all his friends to his son's wedding feast but soon discovers that everyone has better things to do. 'I have prepared my breakfast!' the king proclaims, or in Old English, *undern-mete min gearwad!* *Undern-mete* also appears in the Book of Daniel in a reference to Habakkuk, a man whom an angel carried to Babylon by his hair so that he could give a proper meal to Daniel in the lions' den. (Never face lions on an empty stomach.) In the Latin Vulgate Bible the word *prandium* (dinner) is used, but the Old English translation says, 'Habakkuk could in one moment go so far and carry with him his breakfast (*undern-mete*)'.

The truth is that time was far less exact than a dictionary definition of 'nine in the morning' implies. The word 'hour' didn't appear in English until the thirteenth century (Middle English 'ure'). Common time words in Old English include *tīd* (from which we get 'Yuletide' and 'Shrovetide') and *stund*. Although *tīd* and *stund* are usually translated as 'time' or 'hour', they really refer to a time *when a thing happens* (time for dinner, time for bed), not an exact time of day (five o'clock, two forty-five). For most people, knowing approximately when the sun would rise and set would have been sufficient.

There was more of a need for precision in the monastery, since monks had to pray at regular intervals throughout the day. The monastic hours were governed by sunlight and darkness: matins (or lauds) was at dawn, prime at sunrise, sext at midday, vespers at

sunset and compline when complete darkness finally arrived. Terce (between prime and sext) and none (between sext and vespers) were based on the schedule for the changing of the guard in ancient Rome. The Latin names for the monastic hours endured, and an evening prayer service in the Catholic Church is still called vespers.

Terce was the third hour of the day, which is how *Bosworth-Toller* defines *undern*, an hour roughly halfway between prime (sunrise) and sext (midday). If the sun rises at six, reaching its zenith at twelve noon, terce (or *undern*) would be approximately nine in the morning. But because the sun rises and sets at different times throughout the year, terce and *undern* could not be as specific as ‘nine in the morning’. A more accurate translation of *undern* is thus ‘between sunrise and midday’ or simply ‘morning’.

Etymologically, *undern* has to do with an ‘interim’, ‘inner time’, or ‘in-between time’. During the early medieval period this interim was between sunrise and midday, but that changed over time, gradually shifting to later in the day. An eleventh-century guidebook for priests instructs that if you’re fasting, do not be ‘he who fasts and saves his *undern-mete* until evening’, deceitfully ‘giving up’ food that you intend to eat later. Here *undern-mete* may simply refer to the earlier meal of the day, which would have been midday dinner. By the fourteenth century, Middle English ‘undern’ referred to midday (between sunrise and sunset), while in the fifteenth century it could be afternoon (between midday and sunset) or even evening (between sunset and complete darkness). In the nineteenth century, modern English ‘undern’ wasn’t even a time but the *meal* consumed at that time. Over the course of a millennium, ‘undern’ went from meaning ‘morning’ to ‘afternoon snack’.

While *undern* survived (albeit as a changing entity) for centuries, the word *morgen-drenc* did not. *Morgen-drenc* (morning-drink) appears only a couple times in Old English in leechbooks. With

only a few contexts from which to infer a definition, *morgen-drenc* is tricky to define. It appears to be a drink consumed in the morning with special (perhaps even magical) healing properties. To me this is an excellent description of coffee, but England didn't get its first coffee-house until 1651, so the scribe must have had something else in mind.

According to a leechbook called the *Lacnunga* (or *Recipes*), a king named Arestolobius, who was particularly knowledgeable in medicine, could make a *godne morgendrænc*, or 'good morning-drink'. His drink could cure almost anything: headache, giddiness, brain fever, lung disease, jaundice, tinnitus, unhealthy faecal discharge, not to mention 'every temptation of the Devil'. To make a good *morgen-drenc*, the *Lacnunga* says, you must combine a variety of plants (dill, mint, celandine, betony, sage, wormwood, etc.) and spices (such as cumin and ginger) in a cup of cold wine. Puzzlingly, although the remedy is called a morning-drink, the *Lacnunga* specifies that the patient should consume it at night. Is it a morning-drink because it has the greatest effect the morning after taking it? Are you meant to brew it in the morning? Unfortunately, as is the case with many rare and short-lived words, we can only guess.

Skinking cow-warm milk

In early medieval England cattle were essential to maintaining a good food supply. Not only did they provide milk and meat, they performed essential physical labour. Fields could be ploughed faster with cattle, enabling farmers to grow crops on a larger scale. Cattle were so important to the economy that linguistically they were equated with riches. The primary definition of *feoh* (the F-rune *ƿ*, pronounced FEH-oh), is 'cattle', but *feoh* also means 'money' or 'wealth'.

Feoh, the first rune in futhork, appears in *The Rune Poem*, a sort of Old English alphabet song:

ƿ byþ frofur ƿira gehwylcum.
Feoh is a comfort to all men.

Either ‘cattle’ or ‘wealth’ suits this context. Today the word ‘wealth’ might conjure up thoughts of big houses and fancy cars rather than cows, but the word ‘fee’ (which only dropped its bovine connotations sometime in the sixteenth century) still bears the comforting promise of money.

The resemblance of Old English *cū* (cow) to Scots ‘coo’ is no coincidence. The kingdom of Northumbria, which lay partly in south-eastern Scotland, spoke Old English. This was pretty much the only English-speaking area of Scotland until the thirteenth century; the rest of the land spoke Gaelic. By the end of the Middle Ages, the Middle English of Northumbria had diverged significantly from that in the southern part of the kingdom, becoming what we now call Early Scots. Some Old English words that changed in modern English have remained much the same in modern Scots.

Old English has a wealth (or *feoh*) of cow-related words, ranging from anatomy – *cū-ēage* (cow’s eye), *cū-horn* (cow’s horn), *cū-tægel* (cow’s tail) – to useful by-products – *cū-meoluc* (cow’s milk), *cūe mesa* (cow’s dung), *cū-micge* (cow’s urine, used in medical remedies). A *cū-cealf* (calf) lives in a *cū-byre* (cowshed), watched over by a *cū-hyrde* (cowherd). From *cū-meoluc* you can make *cū-butere* (cow’s butter), or you can drink it straight after milking when it’s still *cū-wearm* (cow-warm).

How warm is ‘cow-warm’ milk? Milk comes out of a cow at around 38.3°C (101°F), a temperature that a medieval farmer would neither know nor need to know. Do you know the temperature of milk

straight from the fridge? It should be no more than 5°C (41°F), just cold enough to slow the growth of psychotropic bacteria. You don't need to measure the temperature of the milk you're drinking to know whether it came straight from the fridge or if it has been sitting out for a while. You know this instinctually from years of drinking 'fridge-cold' milk. Similarly, with years of experience drinking 'cow-warm' milk, you would probably be able to tell if the milk was warm enough to be straight from the udder.

The phrase 'cow-warm milk' sounds rather poetic, evoking green pastures and industrious milkmaids, but *cū-wearm* appears only in prosaic, practical contexts like this medical remedy:

Gehæt scenc fulne cuwearmre meolce.

Heat a cupful of cow-warm milk.

The words for 'heat' (*gehæt*), 'full' (*fulne*), 'cow-warm' (*cuwearmre*) and 'milk' (*meolce*) look or at least sound vaguely familiar, but what about *scenc* (pronounced SHENCH)? The verb **scencan** means 'to pour out liquor for drinking' or 'to give to drink', actions for which a **scenc** (cup) is required. The Middle English verb 'shench' or 'shenk' survived into the fifteenth century and is related to the now obsolete Scots word 'skink', which also means 'to pour out liquor for drinking'. Though unfamiliar to most English speakers, the word still pops up in contemporary Scottish literature. Don Paterson, born in Dundee, refers to someone who 'skinks' rum into cups for drinking in his poem 'Nil Nil' (1993).

Whether you prefer milk *cū-wearm* or fridge-cold, you can skink it into a *scenc*, thinking of a time when wealth was measured in cows.

Having a bite

Someone who is ‘going for a bite’ generally does not wish to be gnawed upon by a hungry or overly aggressive dog. They merely want a snack. However, when Middle English ‘snack’ made its first appearance around 1400, its primary definition was ‘a snap, a bite, especially that of a dog’. Around 350 years later, ‘snack’ finally acquired the definition ‘a mere bite or morsel of food’, as opposed to a regular-sized meal.

In Old English a bite or morsel of food is a *snǣd*. *Sin-snǣd*, like *offrung-spic*, is a hapax, and the fact that there is only one context from which to infer its meaning makes it especially difficult to translate. *Sin-snǣd*’s one occurrence is in the poem *Beowulf*, when the frightening creature called Grendel murders a sleeping warrior in King Hrothgar’s mead-hall:

He tore eagerly, bit the body, drank streams of blood, swallowed
synsnǣdum.

The prefix *sin-* (or *syn-*) has two potential meanings – ‘everlasting’ or ‘big’ – so is a *sin-snǣd* an ‘ever-morsel’ or a ‘big-bite’? A ‘big bite’ could last a long time, theoretically, so perhaps a *sin-snǣd* could also be an ‘ever-morsel’. But the one occurrence of *sin-snǣd* in Old English is in no way an ‘everlasting’ bite. Grendel devours his victim in no time at all, chomping off huge morsels of human flesh – definitely ‘big bites’, certainly *not* ‘ever-morsels’.

Cheese week?

Moving on from man-flesh, a much tastier *snǣd* to swallow is *cȳse* (cheese), and what better time for it than *cȳswuce*? If *cȳse* is cheese

and **wuce** is week, then the meaning of *cȳswuce* (pronounced CHUEZ-WUCH-uh) must be obvious.

In Old English religious texts, the word *cȳswuce*, which looks a lot like ‘cheese week’, refers to the week following the last Sunday before Lent, a forty-day period of fasting for Christians. The first day of Lent, Ash Wednesday, changes its date each year but falls sometime in February or March. On this day of penitence, the faithful receive ashes on their foreheads. It has been suggested that ‘cheese week’ would have been the last week that cheese was allowed before Lent – a somewhat random specification given that cheese was just one among many foods to be avoided. The day before Ash Wednesday is Shrove Tuesday, also known today as Pancake Day or Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday). Shrove Tuesday is the last chance for Christians to use up the fatty foods in their pantries before their forty-day fast. So is *cȳswuce* a week specially designated as the time to eat all your cheese? After all, in Slavic countries there is the Orthodox Christian tradition of Maslenitsa, or Cheesefare Week. During Maslenitsa, the last week before Lent, meat is forbidden, but cheese, milk, eggs and other dairy products are still allowed.

But there are a few problems with *cȳswuce* meaning ‘cheese week’. It is true that medieval Christians were permitted to consume cheese on the Monday and Tuesday before Lent, but according to an Old English sermon, *cȳswuce* is actually the first four days of Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday. Why would these four days be called ‘cheese week’ if it’s when Christians *weren’t* allowed to eat cheese?

It helps if we know that the first four days of Lent (Wednesday through Saturday) were known in Middle English as ‘clensing daies’ (cleansing days). They were a time for Christians to cleanse and purify themselves for the holy fast. What if, instead of *cȳse* ‘cheese’ + *wuce* ‘week’, *cȳswuce* were *cīs* + *wuce*? Old English *cīs* (pronounced CHEES) is an adjective meaning ‘fastidious’ or ‘choosy in one’s diet’, so rather than a time for cheese consumption, *cȳswuce* would be a time for

fastidious eating, fasting and purification. As there was no dictionary or standardised system of spelling words in medieval England, people tended to spell them however they pronounced them. You might spell a word differently due to your local dialect, so *cȳswuce* isn't necessarily an error. Of course, there's still the problem of a four-day 'week', but 'choosy week' makes a lot more sense than 'cheese week'. And really, if cheese had been limited to only four days of the year, that would have been a sorry situation indeed.

Trial by bite

Cheese may not have a place in a Lenten homily or sermon, but it does belong in a code of law. How do you tell whether someone is telling the truth? With a *snǣd* of bread and cheese, of course!

Cor-snǣd is one of four ordeals referred to in Old English law books to determine an accused person's guilt or innocence. The noun ***ge-cor*** means 'choice' or 'decision', so a literal translation of *cor-snǣd* is 'decision-bite'. To be cleared of a crime, you needed family or friends who would vouch for you. Ideally you'd ask family or friends to take oaths on your behalf, testifying to your impeccable character. Character witnesses would either make amends with your accuser or carry on the feud for your sake. But if you lacked witnesses, or their petitions didn't work, you might have to face an ordeal like one of the following:

- 1 *Boiling water*. Suspend a stone in a vessel of boiling water (wrist-deep or elbow-deep, depending on the required severity). The accused must lift out the stone with one hand. Afterwards, the accused's hand must be bound and left otherwise untreated. Unwrap the hand after three days; if it is infected, the accused is guilty.

- 2 *Hot iron.* Heat an iron ball. The accused must carry the hot ball a pre-measured distance. Depending on the required severity of the ordeal, a one-pound ball must be carried a distance of three feet, or a three-pound ball a distance of nine feet. Afterwards, bind the accused's hand and wait three days. If the hand is infected, the accused is guilty.
- 3 *Cold water.* First, a priest must exorcise and consecrate a pit of water. Then tie the hands of the accused below their knees and lower them into the water. If the accused sinks to a depth of 1.5 ells (about two to three feet), they are innocent. If the accused floats, it means the sanctified water is rejecting them for their sins, thus proving their guilt.
- 4 *Cor-snād.* The accused must place an ounce of bread and cheese in their mouth. If they can easily swallow it, they are innocent. If they choke or have difficulty swallowing, they are guilty.

For the first two ordeals, you have to hope your immune system kicks in quickly and effectively, and that there's no nasty bacteria on the bandage. For the cold-water ordeal, you have to defy physics and somehow have a body mass denser than water (perhaps by hiding some rocks in your pockets). But the ordeal of chewing and swallowing some food? How could you *not* pass such an easy test?

Sarah Larratt Keefer, a scholar of medieval literature, posits a gag reflex theory based on the fact that the bread and cheese would have been quite different in early medieval England from what we eat today. The ordeal bread would most likely have been made from barley, a high-protein, glutinous grain that can really dry out your mouth, making it harder to swallow. English barley was less refined and harder to chew than barley from the Mediterranean, so much so that it was referred to as *horse mete*, 'food for horses'. Not only would

barley bread have been unpalatable, it may have contained toxins that cause throat and stomach inflammation and vomiting. The cheese would not have been prepared with today's food safety standards and may have contained salmonella. The symptoms of salmonella don't kick in for twelve to seventy-two hours on average, but then the law books do not specify the period of time the accused must wait after eating to be cleared of guilt. Did you have to wait a day to be in the clear? I would guess that God's judgement was supposed to be made sooner rather than later and not require a three-day test period. In any case, Keefer argues that someone undergoing the *cor-snāð* ordeal would have been forced to eat food that was not only 'unpalatable to a very considerable degree' but potentially toxic.

The medieval literature scholar John Niles is sceptical of Keefer's theory, saying that in medieval England, 'barley bread and cheese would probably have been routine fare in a humble household'. Food of any kind would likely be welcome to the person undergoing the ordeal, who would have endured fasting over the three days prior. As Niles points out, 'an empty stomach is the best sauce'. Barley was grown for feeding animals as well as humans; it wasn't as tasty as wheat, but it was easier to grow. The cheese would have been heavily salted, dense and crumbly, similar to Cheshire cheese – probably not seen as potentially toxic since people ate it all the time. Niles is more on board with Keefer's explanation of *cor-snāð* as a psychological ordeal. When you're nervous, your throat constricts and your mouth becomes dry. During an ordeal, you are bound to feel nervous, whether guilty or innocent. You may even experience nausea or an upset stomach as you would in any high-stakes examination.

According to the eleventh-century law codes, the *cor-snāð* ordeal is intended for a 'friendless altar-servant', a priest or cleric of limited power with no kinsmen to support his oath. Being 'friendless' had far worse implications than feeling lonely. A friendless cleric, with no one

to vouch for him, would have had to take his chances with *cor-snāð*, and the outcome of this ‘decision-bite’ would be seen as God’s own judgement. The fear of perjuring himself before God (a sure way to end up in hell) may have been enough to make a priest confess to a crime. The bread was most likely symbolic; during Mass, after all, bread could represent or even be transformed into the body of Christ. Today, when a person swears with their hand on the Bible, they do not necessarily believe that a lie will bring God’s wrath upon them, but the Bible (like the bread) is a symbol that signifies the seriousness of their oath.

There is arguably one secular, rather spontaneous example of *cor-snāð* in 1053. Godwin, Earl of Wessex, denied his own treachery to King Edward the Confessor at a royal banquet, saying, ‘God forbid that I should swallow this morsel, if I am conscious of any thing which might tend, either to [your brother’s] danger or your disadvantage.’ According to the twelfth-century chronicle of William of Malmesbury, ‘On saying this, [Godwin] was choked with the piece he had put into his mouth, and closed his eyes in death.’

Whatever the effectiveness of *cor-snāð*, it’s best to face any trial with a clear conscience, a clear throat and a strong stomach.

Second *wordbord*

æg, noun (AIE / 'æj): Egg.

bēan-broþ, noun (BAY-ahn-BROTH / 'be:an-,brɔθ): Bean broth.

bēo-brēad, noun (BAY-oh-BRAY-ad / 'be:ɔ-,bre:ad): Royal jelly (bee-food), the glandular secretion of worker bees used to feed larvae; (in some contexts) honeycomb.

bēon-broþ, noun (BAY-on-BROTH / 'be:ɔn-,brɔθ): Definition uncertain: possibly a drink made from honey or mead (bee-broth), but more likely an alternate spelling of *bēan-broþ*.

brēad, noun (BRAY-ad / 'bre:ad): Bread (not as common as *hlāf*); food.

brīw, noun (BREE-ew / 'bri:w): Paste or pottage made mainly from grain or meal.

butere, noun (BUH-teh-ruh / 'bʌ-tɛ-rə): Butter.

cicen, noun (CHIH-chen / 'tʃi-tʃɛn): Chicken, chick.

cīs, adjective (CHEES / 'tʃi:s): Fastidious, squeamish (in eating).

cor-snæd, noun (KOR-SNAD / 'kɔr-,snæ:d): Trial morsel (decision-bite); consecrated piece of bread or cheese to be swallowed in trial by ordeal.

cū, noun (KOO / 'ku:): Cow.

cū-butere, noun (KOO-BUH-teh-ruh / 'ku:-,bʌ-tɛ-rə): Cow's butter, butter made from cow's milk.

cū-bȳre, noun (KOO-BUE-ruh / 'ku:-,by:-rə): Cow byre, cowshed.

cū-cealf, noun (KOO-CHEH-alf / 'ku:-,tʃɛalf): Cow's calf.

cū-ēage, noun (KOO-AY-ah-yuh / 'ku:-,e:a-jə): Cow's eye.

cū mesa, noun (KOO-eh-MEH-za / 'ku:-ɛ-,mɛ-za): Cow's dung.

cū-horn, noun (KOO-HORN / 'ku:-,hɔrn): Cow's horn.

cū-hyrde, noun (KOO-HUER-duh / 'ku:-,hyr-də): Cowherd, person in charge of cows.

cū-meoluc, noun (KOO-MEH-o-luk / 'ku:-,mɛɔ-lʌk): Cow's milk.

cū-micge, noun (KOO-MIDG-uh / 'ku:-,mi-dʒə): Cow's urine.

cū-tægel, noun (KOO-TA-yell / 'ku:-,tæ-jɛl): Cow's tail.

cū-wearm, adjective (KOO-WEH-arm / 'ku:-,wɛarm): Warm from the cow (cow-warm).

cycel, noun (KUE-chell / 'ky-tʃɛl): Little cake (not sweet).

cȳse, noun (CHUE-zuh / 'tʃy:-zə): Cheese.

cȳswuce, noun (CHUEZ-WUCH-uh / 'tʃy:-z-,wʌ-tʃə): Definition uncertain: possibly a time for fasting and purification at the beginning of Lent.

feoh, noun (FEH-oh / 'fɛɔx): Cattle, livestock; property, wealth, money; value, price, fee; name of the F-rune ƿ.

ge-cor, noun (yeh-KOR / jɛ-'kɔr): Choice, decision.

heorþ, noun (HEH-orth / 'hɛɔrθ): Hearth, fireplace; home, household.

hlāf, noun (H'LAWF / 'hla:f): Bread, loaf.

hlāf-æta, noun (H'LAW-VAT-ah / 'hla:-,væ-ta): Dependant
(bread-eater).

hlāford, noun (H'LAW-vord / 'hla:-vɔrd): Lord, male head of a
household (bread-guardian).

hlæfdige, noun (H'LAV-dih-yuh / 'hlæ:v-dɪ-jə): Lady, female head of a
household (bread-maker).

hunig, noun (HUN-ih / 'hʌ-nɪj): Honey.

medu, noun (MEH-duh / 'mɛ-dʌ): Mead, alcoholic drink made from
honey.

meolc, noun (MEH-olk / 'mɛɔlk): Milk.

mete, noun (MEH-tuh / 'mɛ-tə): Food.

morgen, noun (MOR-gen / 'mɔr-gen): Morning.

morgen-drenc, noun (MOR-gen-DRENCH / 'mɔr-gen-,drentʃ):
'Morning-drink', some sort of healing drink or potion.

morgen-mete, noun (MOR-gen-MEH-tuh / 'mɔr-gen-,mɛ-tə): Breakfast
(morning-food).

ofen, noun (OV-en / 'ɔ-vɛn): Oven.

offrung-spic, noun (OFF-frung-SPITCH / 'ɔf-frʌŋ-,spɪtʃ): 'Offering-
bacon', bacon offered to idols.

scenc, noun (SHENCH / 'ʃɛntʃ): Cup.

scencan, verb (SHEN-khan / 'ʃɛn-kan): To pour out liquor for
drinking; to give to drink.

sin-, prefix (SIN / 'sɪn): Ever, everlasting; (in some cases) big.

sin-snæd, noun (SIN-SNAD / 'sɪn-,snæd): Huge morsel, big bite.

smēga-wyrm, noun (SMAY-ga-WUERM / 'smɛ:-ga-,wɪrm):
Penetrating worm that makes its way into the flesh.

snæd, noun (SNAD / 'snæd): Morsel, bit, bite, slice, cut.

spic, noun (SPITCH / 'spɪtʃ): Bacon, the fatty meat of swine.

stund, noun (STUND / 'stʌnd): Time, hour; the time appointed for a particular action.

swīn, noun (SWEEN / 'swi:n): Pig, swine.

tīd, noun (TEED / 'ti:d): Time, hour; period of time.

undern, noun (UN-dern / 'ʌn-dɛrn): The time between sunrise and midday, morning.

undern-mete, noun (UN-dern-MEH-tuh / 'ʌn-dɛrn-,mɛ-tə): Food eaten at *undern* (in the morning), breakfast.

wuce, noun (WUCH-uh / 'wʌ-tʃə): Week.