Nicola Denzey Lewis

Food for the body, the body as food: Roman martyrs and the paradox of consumption

Abstract: Each year in Sicily, Sicilians commemorate the life and death of Saint Agatha, a young woman martyred in antiquity, by consuming small cakes in the shape of a female breast. How did such a curious practice – eating a specific food shaped like a female body part – come to commemorate a late antique martyrdom, and when? This paper considers the curious conflation of bodies – particularly martyrial bodies – and food in late antique Christian martyrial legends, and explores how gender and consumption work together in text and literature to produce a distinctive preoccupation with body parts, fluids, meat, milk, and bread – sometimes positive, sometimes negative, and occasionally meant to evoke disgust or even delight.

Each February 5th in the city of Catania, Sicilians commemorate their patron saint, Agatha. The heady mix of pious Catholic ritual – extravagant and deeply felt – and raucous street celebrations provides rich opportunities for considering “lived religion.” The festival is resolutely modern in many ways – it continues unabated in 21st century Italy – and yet, it centers around a young woman believed to have been martyred in 251 CE, linking modernity with antiquity. How a modern Italian community evokes the collective memory of their patron saint is a fascinating and huge topic, albeit one that I cannot fully explore here in a project dedicated to antiquity. Nevertheless, this contribution to LAR’s final meeting conference volume will focus on one particular element of this Catanian feast. During these festal days, in memory of Agatha’s sexual mutilation at the hands of her torturers, Sicilians bake and consume mimetic food: small cherry-topped iced cakes known as *minne di Sant’Agata* or, in Sicilian dialect, *minnuzzi di Sant’Ajta* – Saint Agatha’s little breasts.

Why do Catanians “eat” Agatha? How do they do so, and why? Historian Cristina Mazzoni, in her wonderful book on women, cooking, and religious behaviors, terms the *minne* “edible icons of sexual sadomasochism” whose white icing “highlights rather than covers the perversion they evoke” (Mazzoni 2005, 81). Is this not a curious way of commemorating a saint – to make her severed sexual

body part into a confection? As a historian, I too am captivated by the question of how a late antique narrative – composed and circulated in early monastic environments – came to be transformed into a massive civic festival, and how (in particular) the late antique narrative sexual torture of a young woman came to be performed by playfully consuming delicious cakes in the form of her severed breasts. How did we move from one to the other? And how ancient is this tradition? Did anything like it exist in late antiquity? Sadly, most connective threads to the past can no longer be discerned, so I can follow here only one into antiquity: the curious conflation of a Christian martyr's body with food which, as it turns out, is not as strange or as rare as one might think.

1 The martyrial body

Much has been written recently on the phenomenon of early Christian martyrdom. Inspired largely by Michel Foucault, scholars of late antiquity in the 1990s made a “corporeal turn,” considering the body as a particularly rich site for cultural production and projection. Some focused on the bodies of the martyrs themselves, particularly on the social functions of the martyrial body and its potential for channeling collective memory, tightening social cohesion, and structuring secular and ecclesiastical authority (e.g. DeSoucey et al. 2008; Tilley 1991; Perkins 1994).¹ These studies share the conviction that martyrdom was a historical phenomenon and that by studying the psychology and physiology of torture in, for example, modern totalitarian regimes, we might come to understand what Christian martyrs endured in antiquity.

Another stream of scholarship, by contrast, considers the work that the largely fictive genre of Christian martyr literature has done in supporting the goals of nascent Christianity (e.g. Shaw 1996; Castelli, 2004; Moss 2012). This work is immensely useful and perceptive, allowing us new insights into a troubling phenomenon that many see as central to Christianity's growth. A focus on the martyrial body is no less absent in these studies, but there has been more of a conscious attempt to read the body not as the lived experience of individual martyrs but as a carefully crafted object embedded within the deeply ideological worldview revealed in a certain strand of early Christian literature – as Stephanie Cobb puts it, “not a raw biological fact but a cultural construct” (Cobb 2016, 11).

¹ These works of scholarship on late antiquity are inspired primarily by Scarry 1985 and Glucklich 2001.

As such, we cannot theorize the martyrial body using comparanda from modernity, because that body can only be understood within the specific culture that “thinks” it.

Whatever its positionality, modern scholarship on the martyrial body has been key to reconceptualizing the sort of cultural work that the Christian body did in late antiquity. But how does this reconceptualization help us to make sense of eating Agatha’s breasts? Here, we must adopt a broad view that glosses over cultural specificities; I will return later to the issue of whether such a ritual might have existed in antiquity. For now, one might argue that food is another “tool” that serves to mark nationalism, religiosity, and cultural traditions – no less so than the body.² Both the body of the martyr and food itself accomplish similar cultural work. Both act to cohere society, acting as the locus or focal point of group identity. Food and the body of the martyr both possess significant social power. This much is true now; it is also fair, I think, to hypothesize that this was also true of antiquity. Understood broadly, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that food and the body sometimes come together in Christian martyr narratives, with their heavy emphasis on commemoration and in mobilizing a shared, group identity. In the case of Agatha, Catanian social identity involves both adopting Agatha as a patron saint and celebrating her feast days through the consumption of socially particular and characteristically Catanian foods. The specific food ingested – the breast cakes – are likely not an ancient tradition, but celebrating civic cultural identity through rituals involving food very likely is. Still: why do Sicilians associate food with the deaths and dismemberment of holy women?

June di Schino, in her fascinating article on the origins of the *minne di Sant’Agata*, notes that they originated within female religious orders of Palermo, which during the 14th and 15th century began to specialize in the *arte dolciaria*, the arts of confectionary (di Schino 1995; cf. Mazzoni 2005). Their specialties were clever artifice – from these kitchens first emerge marzipan fruits artfully crafted to resemble their real counterparts, still produced in Italian bakeries to this day – and also coyly seductive. Their introduction provoked minor scandal. Di Schino reproduces a passage from Prince Tomasi de Lampedusa’s bestseller *Il Gattopardo* (1950):

Don Fabrizio asked for some of these [breast cakes], which, as he held them in his plate, looked like a profane caricature of St. Agatha. ‘Why ever didn’t the Holy Office forbid these cakes when it had the chance? St. Agatha’s sliced-off breasts sold by convents, devoured at dances! Well, well!’
(di Schino 1995, 67)

² Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Counihan 1999; Davidson 1999; Douglas 1984; Farb and Armelagos 1980.

Agatha's breast cakes are not the only martyrially mimetic foods in modern Italy. Santa Lucia, purportedly a virgin who lived and died in the Diocletianic period, put out her own eyes so as not to tempt men with her beauty.³ In Christian iconography, Lucia is immediately recognizable from the small platter she carries holding her own eyeballs; she is commemorated in Italy with double swirled Santa Lucia buns with raisins in their centers that are meant to look like eyes. There is also a special Lucia gruel offered up only on her feast day, made sweet with candied fruit and soaked barley grains that evoke tiny clenched-shut eyes. Some Sicilian shops even offer Lucia meatball sandwiches, where an oversized meatball is stuffed into a sort of pita bread; cut in half along the center, this sandwich resembles a giant, oozing eyeball. These foods are grotesque; at the same time, they are playful.

Robin Darling Young calls women saints' festivals in late antiquity "rituals of exaltation" (Young 2014, 125). By the modern era, they had become rituals of consumption, transmuting the sacrificial flesh of young women into meatballs or buns or cakes joyfully consumed as part of civic festivals. Agatha breast cakes *are* Agatha; being made once a year, they mark time – the day that Agatha was killed – and they make up civic identity and celebration: "this is what we Catanians do, here in Catania." It could be thought of as macabre, but human flesh transmutes in Sicily into sugar icing and candy cherry nipples, and who can be faulted for enjoying the spoils of the ancient executioner, of performing her dismemberment on a dessert plate?

I doubt these traditions of corporeally mimetic foods in the public domain, so to speak, would have developed without the hagiographic elaborations and imaginative horizons of late antique male clerics and, before them, the anonymous Christian writers of martyrologies that focused heavily on descriptions of the body that emphasized its carnality. Although the martyrs rarely felt pain, readers are treated to extensive, extended descriptions of the tortured body. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* – arguably the earliest text of the genre – we learn, for instance, that the bodies of Christians were flayed until their sinews and veins were visible (2.2). The later martyrologies produced in abundance between the 5th and the 15th centuries are no less stinting in their description of bodies flayed, torn, split, chopped up, dragged, chewed by wild animals, drowned, and burned. For female martyrs, sexual torture was commonplace, at least in terms of

³ The detail of Lucia's blindness appears no earlier than the 16th century; variants of the legends exist, with either Lucia blinding herself, or her eyes being gouged out as part of the tortures that lead to her death.

disfiguring faces and cutting off breasts – virgin martyrs are always left virginal – until these snuff stories come to a crashing crescendo in tales such as that of the Italian saint Cristina of Bolsena, who is burned on a pyre, tortured with snakes, drowned in a lake with a millstone around her neck, flogged, boiled in a cauldron, and shot through with arrows. She also has her tongue and breasts severed.⁴ The textual history of her martyrology is typically complicated, as various texts were put together from the 5th to the 16th century without any attempt harmonize them, resulting in a grotesque multiplication of bodily terrors which the legendary Cristina was believed to have endured. Already with Cristina, however, we can witness a certain conceptual slippage of Cristina's body into a foodstuff – she is boiled like food, and carved up like an animal. As it happens, this motif in martyr accounts was, by the first 5th century iterations of Cristina's legend, already quite old.

2 Meat, milk, bread: ingesting the martyrial body

We might return, now, to late antiquity for a closer examination of the theme of ingesting the martyrial body. If Agatha's breast cakes in modern day Catania strike us as bizarre, we might note that a curious feature of many early Christian and late antique martyrial accounts is the likening of the martyr's body to food. In particular, we find three foods often invoked: meat, milk, and bread. Each of these three has a slightly different set of symbolic associations, so they are worth considering in isolation. In our oldest martyr literature, a martyr's transformation into food can be positive or negative, depending on the degree of abstraction: a body turned to bread evokes a positive image, but into meat, something monstrous or bestial. Milk can be positive or negative. I will start with meat, perhaps the most basic and obvious of martyrial "foods."

2.1 Meat

Close to the ritual process of sacrifice is the processing of a raw, live human body into cooked meat. A number of early martyr narratives pick up this theme. The church historian Eusebius claims to preserve a letter from the Christian communities at Lyon and Viennes in Gaul recounting the martyrdoms of four

⁴ Cristina's sufferings are also cheerfully celebrated on her feast day (July 24th) in modern-day Bolsena, but she does not have any special food associated with her.

Christians: Maturus, Sanctus, Blandina, and Attalus. The transformation of these human bodies into cooked meat is nothing short of horrifying. The letter tells how, as a last form of torture, the martyrs were placed in an iron chair, “on which the roasting of their own bodies clothed them with its reek” (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.38, trans. Lake, 425). Sanctus, for instance, is pressed with red-hot copper plates on his groin that reduce him to a bruised, cooked piece of sexually undifferentiated meat. Not only does Sanctus lose his gender, he loses his human form altogether: “it was all one wound and bruise, wrenched and torn out of human shape” (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.23, trans. Lake, 417). Robbed of his human form and by extension, his humanity, Sanctus is reduced, at death, to a grotesque hunk of meat.

The same letter details the sufferings of Sanctus’s fellow Christian, Attalus:

And Attalus, when he was put on the iron chair and was being [burned] and the reek arose from his body, said to the crowd in Latin, ‘Lo! This which you are doing is to eat men, but we neither eat men nor do anything else wicked.’

(*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.52, trans. Lake, 431–433)

Attalus thus bitterly addresses the false charge that Christians practiced cannibalistic feasts, defiantly pointing out the irony: it is not the Christians but the pagan audience who are the cannibals – strikingly, smelling the aroma of the martyr’s roasted flesh is equated with eating. As a last example, the most famous martyrological account of humans as roasted meat is, of course, the torture and execution of Lawrence of Rome. Placed on a hot grill, Lawrence musters a little humor, suggesting that he is fully cooked on one side, and that it is time to turn him over to cook his other side. Lawrence remains, to this day, the patron saints of cooks.

2.2 Milk

It would not be inaccurate to note that many of our martyrologies and hagiographies have a distinct preoccupation with breasts, breast milk, or milk. One of the most well-known martyr accounts, the 3rd century *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, is quite explicit about the female body and its capacity for producing milk. The young matron and heroine, Perpetua – imprisoned for refusing to give up her Christian identity – is anxious to be parted from her infant; when he is brought to her and she nurses him in prison, she feels a true sense of wellbeing – even that her prison has now been transformed, for her, into a palace (*M. Perpetua* 3). Later in the narrative, she wishes to wean the child so

that she might face the beasts; the process happens easily and even miraculously: the child weans and Perpetua suffers no pain of engorgement from her breasts (*M. Perpetua* 6). Meanwhile, Perpetua's slave Felicitas has just given birth when she is thrown to the animals; the crowd roars with the indecency of seeing her naked body fresh from giving birth, with her breasts leaking milk (*M. Perpetua* 20). Felicitas is taken off and clothed before being sent out again. These details are often given to support the argument that this text must be authentic, and particularly that Perpetua must indeed have written the prison diary, for only a woman might detail the post-partum body and concerns about it, including details such as worrying about painful engorgement of the breasts.

The *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* does not include language where the bodies of the martyrs are likened to food, although both Perpetua and Felicitas produce life-giving food that is, while important to their identities as women, unimportant to their identities as martyrs. Yet it is intriguing that in one of Perpetua's highly symbolic and significant dreams as she awaits execution, she travels to heaven and receives a sort of sweet milk curd that she tastes in her mouth (*M. Perpetua* 4). Milk, then, is a sort of divine food – produced by the female body, but also transcending it.

To return to Perpetua nursing her soon-to-be-orphaned child in prison, it is interesting that in the early 3rd century – thus, roughly contemporaneous with the setting of the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* circa 203 CE – Tertullian speaks of the service of providing food to those Christians in prison awaiting martyrdom. They provide food for the body (*inter carnis alimenta*) while “our Lady Mother the Church” (*domina mater ecclesia*) provides spiritual food “from her bountiful breasts” (*de uberibus suis*) (*Ad Martyras* 1.1, trans. Thelwall, 693). Tertullian here initiates what would become a long history of envisioning the Church, or even Christ himself, as lactating to provide sustenance for Christians (Bynum 1994, 62–65; 269–276; Penniman 2017).

As much as we find positive imagery around lactating breasts, there is also a way in which milk shows up oddly in places where it should not. In numerous stories of the martyrdom of girls or women in martyr *acta*, their breasts are cut off. In some, they are handed their severed breasts and made to hold them on a platter, as if they were food. The Roman martyr Candida from the 6th century Syriac *Chronicle of Seert*, for example, has each breast cut off and is forced to hold them as she is paraded naked in front of a crowd to (unsuccessfully) humiliate her (Brock 1978, paragraph 13).

Before leaving the topic of milk as a body-food, some time must be spent on considering the abstraction of finding milk where there ought to be blood in martyrologies. Several Roman *passiones* feature accounts of female martyrs whose

breasts, when they are severed, spurt milk rather than blood (in particular, the *Martyrdom of Felicitas and her Seven Sons* and the Acts of Cristina of Bolsena). Still more bizarrely, in the account of the apostle Paul's beheading found in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* we find that milk issues from his head wound rather than blood:

Then Paul stood with his face to the east, and lifting up his hands to heaven prayed at length; and after communing and prayer in Hebrew with the fathers he stretched out his neck without speaking further. But when the executioner (*speculator*) struck off his head, milk spurted upon the soldier's clothing. (*Acts of Paul* 11.5, trans. Schneemelcher, 262)

It is difficult to know what to make of this; in essence, the removal of the breasts of female martyrs renders their bodies male; but Paul's moment of beheading with the spurting of milk from his body renders him, perversely, female – just as medieval accounts of saints drinking the breast milk of Christ renders Jesus as female. Milk, therefore, is more than just the body as food: it is the medium by which a body might be transgendered – female to male, male to female. It also is a site for metaphorical processing of the body: the spurting or feeding of milk is seen as a spiritual, not a literal act, of nourishing the soul – but only when it is not done according to normative biological processes.

2.3 Bread

In theory our oldest Christian martyr account, the 2nd century *Martyrdom of Polycarp* tells the heart-rending story of the elderly bishop Polycarp, arrested in his house and eventually burned in an oven for being a Christian.⁵ Perhaps the most remarkable (not to mention miraculous) element of this story is the transformation of Polycarp's body into food:

Now when he had uttered his Amen and finished his prayer, the men in charge of the fire lit it, and a great flame blazed up and we, to whom it was given to see, saw a marvel. And we have been preserved to report to others what befell. For the fire made the likeness of a room, like the sail of a vessel filled with wind, and surrounded the body of the martyr as with a wall, and he was within it not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked.

(*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 15, trans. Lake, 333)

⁵ I completely agree with Candida Moss's argument (Moss 2013, 95–104) that the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is either a later (i.e. 3rd or 4th century) invention, or that an earlier account was heavily redacted in this period to produce the document we now possess.

Why is Polycarp's body turned into bread? Is the language here purely metaphorical? On the one hand, the author uses a simile here: the body is not bread, but it is like bread. On the other hand, this is no mere simile; this transformation is the content of the "marvel" which the author is compelled to relate. It is miraculous, and remarkable, and serves to mark Polycarp's body as specially holy.

Despite Polycarp's striking postmortem transformation, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is not the only early Christian martyr literature to preserve the idea that the martyrial body can, will, and should be transformed into bread. Ignatius of Antioch was fond enough of the image of Christ's body as sacramental bread that he sought this bodily transformation as a goal. As he is taken from his home in Smyrna to be martyred at Rome, Ignatius pens a series of letters to his fellow Christians. These letters are remarkable for the tremendous obstinacy with which Ignatius faces his fate; he requests that he not be rescued, for his goal is to meet his death fully prepared to suffer. In his *Letter to the Romans*, Ignatius writes,

Suffer me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may be found pure bread of Christ.

(Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 4.1. trans. Lake, 231)

Interesting from an anthropological perspective in this passage is Ignatius's presentation of martyrdom as a process by which a body is transformed into food. Animals, rather than humans, grind wheat into flour, and this flour can be processed into bread. Ignatius then points to a curious metamorphosis: wishing to be "food for the wild beasts" – that is, meat – Ignatius re-signifies meat (simple or pure food) as bread (processed food).

In both the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and Ignatius's *Letter to the Romans*, the process of martyrdom is a sort of philosopher's stone by which human flesh can be transubstantiated into bread, a spiritually higher substance. From where did this idea arise? In the passion narratives, Jesus is never transformed into bread or food. In the Last Supper accounts, by contrast, Jesus "becomes" bread, but the process does not require martyrdom to be effected. Further, neither Polycarp nor Ignatius are meant to be ritually consumed after their transformation – the metamorphosis is an end unto itself. What remains only is the notion that bread is a superior substance to meat, and although ordinarily processed by human labor, the process of martyrdom has the power to process human flesh into divine bread.

3 Understanding the rhetorical function of bodies as food

Martyr narratives are carefully cultivated fictions, filled with literary tropes. The transformation of body into food is one such trope. Even, however, if we recognize these martyr accounts as literary constructions, we still might query why it is that the trope of bodies-as-food is powerful and common within the Catholic imagination.

I offer two different and diametrically opposed theories for why the trope of body-as-food is present in martyr narratives. Both these theories might even be simultaneously correct, because they address different presentations of the trope. The first theory is that the human body is presented as food (usually meat, sometimes milk) because it is meant to evoke shock and disgust. The second is that human body is presented as food (usually bread, sometimes meat or milk) because it is part of a “distancing mechanism” that mitigates the horror of martyrdom.

3.1 Humans as food: disgust

Martyr accounts in which the body is meat rather than bread is meant to evoke disgust. In these accounts of the martyrial body as meat, the martyrs’ flesh is grilled, roasted, boiled, and fried, surely evoking a strong visceral reaction from readers or listeners. What did listeners think of as they heard about Lawrence, grilled like a great piece of meat? Or what about the 5th century poet Prudentius’s *Peristephanon* 5, where the martyr Vincent is tortured by slow-roasting while being basted with a piece of fat left to drip slowly onto his skin? Whatever we might imagine the response to have been, treating people like foodstuffs continues throughout medieval martyr narratives. In the medieval *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, for example, Saint Barbara is boiled in oil like a fritter (*Golden Legend* 6, trans. Ellis, 43).

Who is imagined to be eating this food? Primarily, martyrs were meant to be meat for the wild beasts who were set on them in the amphitheater. Blandina is hung up to be food for the beasts (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.41). At the same time, a consistent theme of martyr-as-meat motif is that animals reject this human food – not because they are distasteful, but because unlike human beings, the animals recognize the inherent holiness of the martyrial body. Thus “not one of the animals touched” Blandina after she was exposed (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.41). Prudentius, too, writes that when Vincent’s body was presented to the

wild beasts, they did not touch it, for they no longer recognized it as food (*Peristephanon* 5).

If animals do not perceive the martyrs as meat, the insinuation within the literature is that, on some level, people *did* – even finding the smell of human meat appetizing. Disgust is at its most heightened, narratively, when there are insinuations or accusations of cannibalism in martyr literature. The palpable horror of treating human flesh as meat comes through clearly in the letters concerning the martyrs of Lyons and Viennes with Attalus’s accusation, as his flesh sears, that Romans were “eating men,” even though no eating was actually going on in this context (*Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.52). Tertullian, too, charges pagans with transitive cannibalism when they eat the meat of animals who fought and killed Christians in the amphitheater (Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 8–9, 50; *Ad nationes* 1.10). The taboo against cannibalism runs deep in human culture; it is one way in which we distinguish the “civilized” from the “uncivilized.” Still, disgust is also only part of the emotional response of the reader or listener to these accounts. Their recitation can provide a full synaesthetic experience for both individuals and a community as they re-imagine the scenes in their mind. But is all this horror too much to bear?

I will turn, at this point, to a relatively little-known late antique martyrology from the eastern *limes* of the late Roman Empire. In the *Martyrs of Najran*, a Christian woman named Ruhm, arrested, requests to be put to death as a martyr (Brock and Harvey 1987). Instead, Ruhm’s daughter and granddaughter are beheaded, and their blood is poured into Ruhm’s mouth. A mother forced to drink her own children’s blood – a forced cannibalism – is akin to the violation of rape, only even more horrifying in that it invokes other violent transgressions: murder, and eating not just human flesh but the flesh of one’s own progeny. This account moves us from disgust to its opposite: an emotional distancing from the body-as-food motif.

3.2 Humans as food: distance

Distancing from the horror of the text is a frequent element of martyr narratives, and is accomplished in a variety of ways. Most directly, martyrologies dwell on grotesque details of the body-as-meat, while, at the same time, emphasizing repeatedly that the martyr her- or himself feels no pain. This “anaesthesia of glory” was first noted by Caroline Walker Bynum (Bynum 1994), and then elaborated by L. Stephanie Cobb in her book *Divine Deliverance* (Cobb 2016). Our own empathic response to pain is therefore short-circuited by the texts’ insistence that despite their corporeal suffering, the martyrs themselves were unaware

of any pain. The martyrs' distancing from their own pain allows the reader to acquire a similar distance.

A second distancing mechanism is at work when we find martyrological gruesomeness so over-the-top that a natural response might be laughter (Cobb 2016, 83–92). Although most of our martyr narratives cannot be said to be funny, there are, nevertheless, moments when they can have a subversive humor. In the medieval martyrological legend of Cristina of Bolsena, her father's attempts to silence and control his defiant daughter result in an escalating battle of wills in which the father comes across as ridiculous as well as cruel; Cristina herself emerges as a virtual trickster for her ability to walk off, unscathed, from collapsing buildings, burning pyres, and attacks of venomous snakes. She even manages to sass back at her father after he cuts off her tongue in a futile effort to silence her (Tracy 2012, 43). Even Lawrence's famous retort to his torturers – "It is done . . . eat it up, try whether it is nicer raw or roasted" (Prudentius, *Peristephanon* 2.406–8 trans. Thomson, 133) – comes across, surely, as a witticism: "Laurence well-done or Laurence tartare?" (Cobb 2016, 84). Cobb also points out another episode in the Donatist martyr account of Maxima and Donatilla, where, after the women are flogged and set on beds of crushed shells, the proconsul offers them "*tatiba*," which appears to have been a kind of seasoning for meat. The women retort, "You are a buffoon [*fatuus*]. Do we not have our august God most high as our seasoning?" (Cobb 2016, 88). Not only does the reader see the absurdity and the wit, there is perhaps a deeper joke here in offering to season the women as if they were meat. Humor, therefore, can be a distancing mechanism even in a martyrology. Recognizing this in the ancient and medieval materials helps us to understand the way in which Agatha's breast cakes fit into Catholic ritual behavior in ways that point to popular reception of a martyrology on the register of playfulness rather than disrespect or impiety.

Finally, it is easy to see how the transformation of martyrs into food is itself a distancing device. All of the rank horror of burning a body at the level of pious narrative is redirected, distanced, and healed/fixed when Polycarp's body in the furnace is transformed into bread. These martyr accounts may invoke a response from a resistant reader – just as the martyr herself might focus the mind on other things so as not to suffer, the reader might be induced to recall the pleasant smell of baking bread or the taste of roasted meat or the sweetness of milk; presumably, the pleasure of these recollections re-focuses the mind away from the horror of the text.⁶

⁶ On the sweet smell of the martyrs as abstraction but also evocative of holiness, see Evans 2002.

All these distancing mechanisms – emphasis on impassibility, or humor, or complete corporeal abstraction – make sense both for understanding Agatha's breast cakes in modern Catania and also the range of possible receptions of martyrologies in antiquity. They are not culturally specific, nor products of modern sensibilities. But were there other ways in which late antique Christians responded to the theme of the martyrial body as food which might be more foreign to us as modern interpreters? Let me return briefly to the *Martyrs of Najran*. After Ruhm is forced to drink her daughter's and granddaughter's blood, she is made to stand before the king. He asks her, cruelly, "How did your daughter's blood taste to you?" Ruhm replies, "Like a pure spotless offering, that is what it tasted like in my mouth and in my soul" (*Martyrs of Najran* 26, trans. Brock and Harvey 114). The account focuses not just on the horror of the act, but on the king's question, where he wants to know *how the body tastes, as if it were food*.

On one level, as I have noted, Ruhm drinking her offspring's blood clearly disgusts and horrifies us. On another level, however, it was surely meant to evoke the Eucharist, as are those moments where martyrs such as Polycarp or Ignatius are likened (or liken themselves) to bread (Barrett 2013, 105; Harvey 2005, 158; Harvey 2006). The scholar of late antiquity Susan Ashbrook Harvey argues persuasively that the discourse of the senses, particularly around smelling and tasting, evoked both scriptural exegesis and liturgical practice, "incorporating individual experience into the shared ecclesial ritual experience of the worshipping community" (Harvey 2005; Barrett 2013, 107). Harvey theorizes that beyond our own (modern) human faculties of sense, in late antique literature there is also an emphasis on "spiritual senses." In the *Martyrs of Najran*, the function of the "spiritual senses" is made explicit by Ruhm's identification of her soul as the source of sensory information. The concept of the "spiritual senses" is useful for understanding not just why taste is important here, but why the martyr's body tastes/smells not like human flesh but like delicious food. The power to taste and smell the martyrs is not corporeal, it is spiritual. While the body may mis-taste or mis-smell, the soul is more discerning, and can taste and smell properly. Through, then, the distancing mechanism that is created by bifurcating human sense experience into the (crass) physical and, on the other hand, the spiritual, images of violence in the *Martyrs of Najran* are transformed into "images of victory and sanctity" (Barrett 2013, 109).

4 Women, torture, bodies, food: moving toward a “lived religion” frame

Christian martyr stories were not made for casual reading; they were written and elaborated as part of the long process of Christianization, ultimately serving the function of marking out new days in the calendar to commemorate those who ended their lives as martyrs. The martyrial body was central to this Christianization of time, inasmuch as time itself came to be marked out through the tortured flesh of human beings. More often than not in late antique and early medieval martyrologies, these human beings were young girls. When the martyr in question was female, or possessed a female body, these martyrologies focused on sexual torture and mutilation of those organs and features that distinguish the female body; again and again, female martyrs have their breasts cut off, effectively neutering them, if not actually making their female bodies more male. Christian rituals of reading aloud martyr stories on the days dedicated to their memory thus embedded pornographic hagiography into civic celebration. But here is what I find fascinating: in so doing, the literary erotics of the female martyr's torture is not only resisted, it is de-fused. How so? Embedded in civic identity and civic time, a reader or listener is redirected from the violent pornography of the text to different resistant readings of the text that play out in the lived experience of the saint's festival. One of these resistant readings, I have argued here, involves food. The question remains, however, at what point in time did this happen?

It is certainly the case that, as of the 4th century, the cult of the saints in the Mediterranean basin involved feasts in commemoration of the martyrs. While this much is clear, whether or not food was likened to the martyrial body remains unknown. All indications are that the feasts involved traditional offerings to the martyrs that had been for centuries before Christianity offered to the ancestors: wine, oil, cakes or grain, and perhaps milk. An offhand comment that Jerome makes to his young friend Eustochium on the occasion of St. Peter's feast in his *Letter* 31 – that on this day gifts of cherries and small cakes in the shape of doves – perhaps indicates that certain foods came to be associated with certain saints, but in this instance, there is nothing to connect these foods mimetically with the apostle Peter. Still, the commensality of the martyr feast and the lack of enthusiasm with which our late antique writers took up the subject with any degree of detail points to, I think, a potent trend in late antique lived Christianity to associate martyrs and food.

Is there a way in which we might theorize this relationship? In a fascinating article, David Frankfurter considers the model of “sacrifice” as a ritual

transformation of some substance from the mundane to an entirely sacred or divine realm (Frankfurter 2004). He details two ways of processing the human body through stages of marginalization and destruction. He writes,

In acts of asceticism and stories of martyrdom, human bodies were transformed into, on the one hand, supernatural mediators with certain heavenly status, and on the other, sacred residues for devotees in coming generations: i.e., relics and substances of ‘blessing’.
(Frankfurter 2004, 530)

In sacrifice, Frankfurter emphasizes, the body becomes a thing: material to be transformed (Frankfurter 2004, 511; cf. Graham, this volume; Hunter-Crawley this volume). He wonders, “How does one ‘process’ the body – imaginatively or through deliberate acts – to extract sacred material or else to obliterate what that body represents?” (Frankfurter 2004, 511).

In the case of the martyrial body as *food* rather than *thing*, the process of that imaginative conceptualization does something Frankfurter does not discuss: it transforms the violence done to the body while maintaining the sanctity of the originated subject itself. To put this differently, the processing of Agatha’s body into a breast-shaped cake annuls or transmogrifies the act of violence upon that body into a form more palatable for social cohesion. When Frankfurter asks, partly rhetorically, “How can a culture rationalize such a horrific act (as human sacrifice)?” he gives two answers: the body can either be rendered sacred, or completely obliterated (Frankfurter 2004, 511). But are these really the only two options? I argue here that they are not; the body can be transformed into something that is not sacred, precisely, but which fits into its own class: mimetic food eaten “in memory of” a martyr. We might therefore shift our attentions from the question of “what” such foods are, but under what circumstances they are produced, under what circumstances they are received, and under what circumstances they are consumed. Here, at the level of action or practice, the “lived religion” aspects of mimetic food begin to be revealed, along with a connection to antiquity.

Although Agatha’s cakes are a modern phenomenon, as June di Schino points out, they were produced by female “reputational entrepreneurs” (DeSoucey et al. 2008) within cloistered monasteries and convents (di Schino 1995). As “reputational entrepreneurs,” these religious women were able to meet a growing market trend for sumptuous foods while also capitalizing on an ostensibly pious focus on Christian martyrs which peaked, like the production of this confection, in the 19th century. What they accomplished may have been a clever marketing innovation, but the very practice of producing virgin cakes likely had very traditional roots. Such foods – Agatha’s breast cakes, as well as Santa Lucia’s eye-shaped buns – have parallels in anatomical votives, well attested in

Italy since the Etruscan period, as Emma-Jayne Graham has investigated elsewhere in this volume. In fact, both breasts and eyes votives were mass produced in antiquity, presumably available cheaply and easily, and were meant not for eating but for depositing, either as requests for healing or as thanks for healing received (Draycott and Graham 2016).

A second ancient parallel for breast cakes may be confections produced in ancient Rome as offerings to the gods, especially those associated with fertility. In the towns of Frascati and Albano, a version of this cookie called *mustaccioli* is still made, fashioned in the shape of a mythical female figure with three breasts. Local folklore asserts that this woman once nourished the people of Nemi, providing milk from two of her breasts and fine Frascati wine from the third. In southern Italy and Sicily, *mustaccioli* are rubbed against statues of the saints and placed on the altar as offerings (di Schino 1995, 69). The biscuit's two ingredients, flour and honey, are separately blessed before they are baked so as to repel the evil eye, blessed again right before baking, and blessed again at the altar (di Schino 1995, 69).

The purchase and consumption of *minne di Sant'Agata* is therefore evocative of an ancient practice of remembering, celebrating, and recollecting a saint in a way that has little to do with Eucharistic overtones or even commemorating martyrdom as a violent obliteration of the female body; in a "lived religion" frame, it links body with a tradition of practice in which the holy person's body is invoked and remembered while bypassing theological elaborations of sacramentalism. At the same time, there are clearly resonances with sacrifice, by which a consecrated thing is destroyed (Detienne and Vernant 1982). The Calabrian anthropologist Francesco Faeta observes that rather than being consumed by fire, these foods are destroyed by human agents, employing eye, hand, and mouth. He notes the sophisticated relationship in the production and consumption of martyrially mimetic foods to what he terms constructive and destructive memory (Faeta 1989). The saint is invoked, fashioned, ingested and then simultaneously embodied, remembered, and destroyed – then the cycle of commemoration begins again the next year. Finally, the fact that female monastic confectioners selected Agatha's severed breasts alludes perhaps not so much to the marked and distinctive focus on pornographic, sexual violence against women in male-authored Christian martyrologies, but to traditional practices of fertility rites on the local or "lived religion" register, wherein sexual body parts (di Schino 1995, 72 and Mazzoni 2005, 81, record confections in the shapes of breasts, vulvas, and phalli) or sexualized figures (such as three-breasted maidens) were consecrated, consumed, or both.

5 Saints' food in the hands of the people: martyrologies and lived religion

Traditions of popular consumption of saint's foods or saint-food enjoy a *longue durée*. Still today, popular Catholic food blogs suggest absurd foods to make and enjoy with the family in memory of a martyr: puffy marshmallow lambs representing Saint Agnes; cupcakes for St. Lawrence's day, decorated to look like grills, complete with little shish kebabs made of frosting that represent his body.⁷ This is play, not piety, and is the essence of "lived religion": spontaneous and improvised, taking things both seriously and really, not so very seriously. And perhaps there is an implicitly subversive quality to them: the Church possesses and controls access to the martyr's body through the recitation of the *passio* and, more to the point, by possession and control of the martyr's body in the form of relics, or what Frankfurter here terms "residue." Martyr food, by contrast, places ownership of the saint back in the hands of the people. Agatha's relics may be locked away in her church and inaccessible, but she can be invoked with every mouthful of pastry. In a similar manner, the performance of martyr accounts within an explicitly ecclesiastical setting instantiates the martyr fully within that setting, establishing a link to the past. But reading aloud a martyr text is not the only form of performance: baking, selling, and eating Agatha cakes instantiates Agatha too – but in a different way, with the performance directed by a very different set of people – no longer clerics or cloistered nuns, but now city bakers – yet targeted to the very same audience as the Church.

Cutting into one of Agatha's cakes with our forks, among a convivial crowd of Sicilians, finally, might remind us to think back on ancient Christian texts, to the curious phenomenon of martyrs likened to food. Is there, in this act, resonances of a hitherto unperceived ritual life for some early Christians? When, as they heard the stories of Polycarp and Ignatius, would they – in addition to gasping, crying, applauding, or other performative responses – have taken up and broken bread together? Can this then help us to think differently, and more expansively, about commensality beyond the Lord's Supper, to a register of human behaviors and responses – not always liturgical, but "lived" religion – deeply and richly textured, satisfying and fully experiential? After all, what could be more transformative and powerful than a communal meal, celebrated in memory of a saint or a savior and their pain, but nevertheless delicious?

⁷ Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/to-grill-or-not-to-grill-commemorating-a-saints-martyrdom-47208967/#5uuDsRoJu7pPZsAS.99>

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