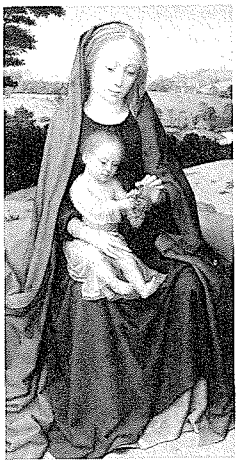
NEW TITLES

History

HOLY FEAST AND HOLY FAST: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women
by Caroline Walker Bynum
Univ. of Calif., 1987
444 pp. $29.95



Throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, Christian women of extraordinary piety did strange things: they exuded miraculous fluids from breasts, fingers, and stigmata; they ingested the filth of the sick; they lived on the Eucharist alone; they felt divine teachings turn to honey in their mouths. But most of all, they fasted.

Why, in the famine-wracked years following 1200, did religious women renounce food? Medieval historians have long held that women, having internalized the misogyny of their times, sought to mortify their weak and despised flesh. Bynum, a University of Washington professor of religion and women's studies, finds otherwise.

Medieval men divided their world into dualities (God/humanity, spirit/flesh, law/mercy). Authority and spirit were male, weakness and corporeality, female. Male saints usually broke with their past lives, renouncing such things as sex or wealth. But for women, a religious vocation meant continuing the activities of childhood, and often provided an escape from the burdens of womanhood: childbearing and the inevitable drudgery of marriage.

Medieval religious women accepted the notion that they were "poor little" creatures, their weakness being the symbol for all humankind. Female suffering—like Christ's—brought salvation.

Modern psychological analyses of anorectics, argues Bynum, do not apply to these early mystics. Rather than seeking to control their bodies in response to social ideals or family pressures, medieval women renounced food for the pain it brought them—the straightest path to God.

EMBATTLED COURAGE: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War
by Gerald F. Linderman
Free Press, 1987
357 pp. $22.50

Union and Confederate soldiers marched into America's first modern war determined to prove themselves men and heroes. The Civil War was to be both glorious and short.

In 1861 both the civilians and military viewed war as a struggle that only the most courageous and God-fearing could win. The realities of combat, says University of Michigan historian Linderman, shot such chivalric notions to Hell. For every man killed on the Civil War battlefield, two died of disease in camp. All told, there were 1.1 million

casualties, including 600,000 dead.

At first, the idea of "courage" spurred each army on. Officers drunk on valor led mad charges against fixed positions—until it became clear that cavalry was no match for massed rifle fire and artillery bombardment.

Midway through the war, both sides began to introduce new tactics and stricter discipline. "Forced to . . . remodel combat behavior, to abandon many of the war's initial tenets, to rationalize a warfare of destruction, and . . . changes in their relationships with commanders," writes Linderman, " . . . soldiers suffered a disillusionment more profound than historians have acknowledged—or the soldiers themselves would concede 25 years later."

MARCUS AURELIUS, A Biography
by Anthony Birley
Yale, 1987
320 pp. $25

Marcus Aurelius's strict pursuit of virtue made him the most boring ruler of the Roman Empire. It also made him the best. Contemporaries and posterity alike judged Aurelius, ruler of Rome from A.D. 161 to 180, "the perfect emperor."

Born into a wealthy, nonroyal family, Marcus became an *eques*, or horseman, at age six, and a priest at seven, under the direct patronage of the emperor Hadrian. At 12, despite his fragile health, he began sleeping on the ground and wearing the rough cloak of a Stoic philosopher.

Impressed by his rectitude, Hadrian dubbed Marcus "Verissimus," or "most truthful," playing on his family name, Verus. He directed his successor (later Emperor Pius Antoninus) to adopt the boy. Marcus modeled himself on the kindly Pius.

But unlike Pius, he could not avoid the battlefield. Abhorring violence, he nevertheless spent several years fighting Germanic tribes on the Empire's northern border, eventually dying there at age 58. As Rome's chief judge, Marcus upheld slavery but promoted freedom whenever possible within the law. His ruling that mothers could will property to their children opened the door for the legal recognition of women.

Much of Aurelius's posthumous fame rests on the strictly private, philosophical "Meditations" he set down during his last 10 years of life. "Bear and forbear," he wrote, quoting Epictetus, an important Stoic philosopher, whose views he preserved in Western thought. Sustained by the Stoic