

Zoltán Szombathy (Eötvös Lóránd University, ELTE, Budapest), “Eating People Is Wrong: Some Eyewitness Accounts of Cannibalism in Mediaeval Arabic Literature”

Cannibalism is a topic that has repulsed and fascinated travellers, ethnologists and ordinary people alike. Representing savagery at its most extreme to members of most cultures, descriptions of this custom often carry a powerful symbolism. William Arens' influential book *The Man-Eating Myth* cast doubt on the existence of customary cannibalism anywhere in human history, and alerted its readers to the need of carefully examining the merits of every account that claims to report instances of anthropophagy.

This paper undertakes to analyse three mediaeval Arabic reports of alleged instances of African cannibalism. After a brief study of the facticity or otherwise of the claims made in the accounts, the main part of the paper explores the ways these reports reflect the attitudes of mediaeval Muslims to the notion of anthropophagy, a form of violence so unlawful and extreme as to be almost beyond imagination. Particular attention is given to the views of certain jurists regarding the eating of human flesh and their attempts at explaining the extreme prohibition of it, which in fact surpasses the prohibition of all other forbidden foods explicitly mentioned in the Quran. In this context, the issue of survival cannibalism – when someone eats part of a human corpse to survive famine conditions – is discussed with reference to the Islamic concept of *darura* (necessity), which is not applicable to the consumption of human flesh. The ideas of Muslim authors concerning cannibalism thus serve to shed light on some of the underlying notions about the limits of lawful violence against a fellow human being.