

A recent best seller, *The Rituals of Dinner* by Toronto classicist Margaret Visser, begins by examining cannibalism in the time of Columbus, with passing reference to an ancient precedent, the man-eating Cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey*. In fact there are numerous examples of cannibalism (or anthropophagy, to use the technical term) in the classical world, and I propose to recall some of them in this article.

Anthropologists distinguish several types of cannibalism: gastronomic cannibalism, in which human flesh is eaten for its taste or as part of the diet; revenge or insult cannibalism, in which you eat your opponents to show your contempt for them; ritual cannibalism, in which dead relatives are eaten, sometimes in the belief that the consumer will thereby inherit their spirit; and famine cannibalism, in which people are driven to devour other humans by sheer starvation. All these types existed in antiquity.

Gastronomic cannibalism was a practice that the ancients had trouble swallowing (so to speak). It existed only among the most barbaric peoples on the frontiers of civilization. Members of Odysseus' crew were eaten not only by the Cyclops, but by Scylla (a beautiful maiden who was turned into a man-eating monster, with six dogs as legs) and the Laestrygonians, cannibalistic giants who sank most of Odysseus' fleet with huge rocks and then speared the sailors like fish.

In Classical Greek times, the only gastronomic cannibals were the Androphagi, neighbours of the Scythians, living in what is now the Ukraine, and possibly (as some scholars have suggested) ancestors of the Finns, among whom cannibalism was still reported in the Middle Ages. Herodotus calls the Androphagi the most savage of men, with no permanent dwellings and no concept of law. In the fourth century AD, St. Jerome claims to have witnessed cannibalism among the Attacotti (neighbours of the Scots), who greatly preferred the buttocks of shepherds and the breasts of women to animal meat. In truth Jerome never visited the land of the Attacotti (which is just as well, since he might have been eaten!), and probably got his information from the history of Ammianus Marcellinus. The Attacotti were a real people, attested as providing auxiliary troops in the fifth century, but the charges of cannibalism cannot be verified.

Ancient revenge cannibalism is found only in myth. The god Cronus swallowed his children as they were born, fearing that one of them would

overthrow him. When Zeus was born, Cronus' wife Rhea gave her husband a stone wrapped in swaddling-clothes to swallow. Zeus thus escaped and later took revenge of his own. Another character, Tydeus of Calydon, accompanied the Seven Against Thebes expedition. Fatally wounded by the Theban hero Melanippus, Tydeus killed him and then ate his brains. Athena, who had intended to save Tydeus' life, changed her mind when she saw this revolting display of insult cannibalism. Similarly in the last book of the *Iliad*, Queen Hecuba describes Achilles (the slayer of her son Hector) as a cruel man whose liver she would love to latch on to and gnaw. In other myths, cannibalism is used as a roundabout way of revenge, by disguising human flesh and serving it to someone you dislike. This is seen in the stories of Tantalus, who tried to deceive the gods by serving them a stew containing his own chopped-up son Pelops (a crime for which Tantalus was condemned to eternal hunger in Hades), and of Pelops' son Thyestes, whose treacherous brother Atreus served him a meal made from the bodies of Thyestes' sons.

Ritual cannibalism is attested among the ancient inhabitants of Ireland who, according to the geographer Strabo, considered it a point of honour to devour their own fathers when they died. The early Christians were also accused of cannibalism, since they were known to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, whom the pagans considered a man rather than a deity.

While most or perhaps all of these claims of cannibalism are fantastic, famine cannibalism was a real and grisly occurrence, especially in time of siege. Assyrian curses against neighbouring peoples express the hope that they will be forced through famine to eat their own children, and cannibalism actually happened during the siege of Babylon in 648 BC. Similar examples of famine cannibalism are recorded during the sieges of Potidaea in Greece, Petelia in Italy, Tauromenium in Sicily, and the Spanish towns of Saguntum, Numantia and Calagurris. When Numantia fell to Scipio in 133 BC, some mothers were found clutching the half-eaten corpses of their children. Such pathetic scenes remind us that even civilized societies are not immune from savagery.