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978-0-521-10882-9 - The Incorruptible Flesh: Bodily Mutation and Mortification in Religion and Folklore

Piero Camporesi

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Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture

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Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture

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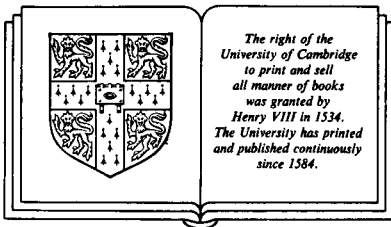
**Bodily mutation and mortification in religion
and folklore**

PIERO CAMPORESI

University of Bologna

Translated by Tania Croft-Murray

Latin texts translated by Helen Elsom



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521108829

Originally published in Italian as *La carne impassibile* by il Saggiatore, Milan 1983 and © il Saggiatore, 1983

First published in English by Cambridge University Press 1988 as *The Incorruptible flesh: bodily mutation and mortification in religion and folklore*

English translation © Cambridge University Press 1988

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This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Camporesi, Piero.

The incorruptible flesh.

(Cambridge studies in oral and literate culture; 17).

Includes index.

1. Body, Human – Religious aspects. 2. Body, Human – Mythology. I. Title. II. Series.

BL604.B64C3613 1988 291.2'2 87-26808

ISBN 978-0-521-32003-0 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10882-9 paperback

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FOREWORD BY PETER BURKE

Although it may be something of an exaggeration to speak of a ‘Bologna school’ of historians, a number of important and innovative studies have been produced in that milieu in the last few years. The books of Carlo Ginzburg, from *The Night Battles* (originally published in 1966) to *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) are now celebrated the world over. Also important, if less well known, are the essays of Carlo Poni on the economic and social history of Bologna and its region, the researches of Adriano Prosperi on the Counter-Reformation, and – rather more difficult to label or classify – the shelf of studies published by Piero Camporesi.

Camporesi teaches Italian literature at the University of Bologna, but what he writes might be better described as a kind of socio-cultural history, which takes literary texts as its point of departure but widens out into a reconstruction of popular mentalities. He first attracted the attention of historians with his *Book of Vagabonds* (1973), an anthology of texts dealing with the language and indeed the world of beggars and thieves in early modern Italy. One of these writers on vagabonds was Giulio Cesare Croce, a popular poet who lived in seventeenth-century Bologna. Camporesi considered Croce’s work at some length in *The Mask of Bertoldo* (1976). Like other popular poets, Croce often composed his poems for Carnival and about Carnival. In order to put this poetry in context, Camporesi therefore discussed Carnival and, more generally, parody and the carnivalesque.¹

The literature of Carnival is preoccupied with food, so it was hardly surprising to find Camporesi, like a good Bolognese, making food the centre of attention in three books: *The Land of Hunger* (1978), *Bread of Dreams* (1980), and *Food Folklore and Society* (1980).² The first of these studies had two complementary themes, times of feasting and times of famine. On one side the description of images of abundance associated with Carnival and the Land of Cockaigne; on the other the absence of food and the quest for food (taking us back to the territory of the vagabond). *Bread of Dreams*, on the other hand, is more concerned with the everyday hunger of ordinary people and the means they took to satisfy it; chestnut bread, bean bread, herbs and hallucinations. In this

¹ *Il libro dei vagabondi* (Turin, 1973); *La maschera di Bertoldo* (Turin, 1976).

² *Il paese della fame* (Bologna, 1978); *Il pane selvaggio* (Bologna 1980), English translation forthcoming; *Alimentazione Folclore Società* (Parma, 1980).

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collection (Camporesi's books are generally collections of essays), the author goes so far as to suggest that many people in early modern Italy lived in a state of almost permanent hallucination, drugged by their hunger or by eating bread adulterated with narcotics such as darnel. Finally, *Food Folklore and Society* moves into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and concentrates on the traditional peasant cuisine. This cuisine, he notes, lacked both variety and abundance, consisting (outside harvest-time and festivals) of one course served twice a day. In Italian peasant society, even salt and eggs were luxuries. In bourgeois society, of course, the situation was very different. Nineteenth-century Italy was two nations, two cultures, or as Camporesi puts it, 'two different alimentary languages'. The grammar of the language of bourgeois food was *La scienza in cucina* (1891) by the bachelor banker Pelegrini Artusi. Is it significant that the Italian Mrs Beeton was a man?³

From the history of food the natural next step was the history of the body, the subject of Camporesi's latest studies. *The Incorruptible Flesh* has been followed by *The Juice of Life* (1984), which deals with the symbolism of blood, and *The Workshops of the Senses* (1985), a collection of essays on medieval and early modern attitudes to the cosmos and its microcosm the human body.⁴

Like the narcotic bread eaten by his peasants, Camporesi's essays are mind-blowing. They are intensely exciting to read but almost impossible to summarise because they do not offer arguments so much as images – phantasmagoric processions of giants, pigs, vagabonds in rags, and so on. They resemble mosaics, built up by the patient juxtaposition of texts, in order to reconstruct and evoke the experience of ordinary people. The author's interests span Europe from the twelfth century to the nineteenth, but the texts he cites most frequently come from Emilia and the Romagna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Camporesi does not limit himself to the description of popular culture. His aim is to decipher it. To do this he relies on the close reading of texts, together with the stimulus of theory. From the theoretical point of view, he is an eclectic. He probably owes most to the great Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work on the carnivalesque, neglected in its own time (the 1930s and 1940s) is only now making an impact on social and cultural historians.⁵

³ Artusi's text was reprinted in 1970 with an introduction by Camporesi.

⁴ *La carne impassibile* (Milan, 1983); *Il sugo della vita* (1984); *Le officine dei sensi*, Milan 1985. His most recent book, *La casa dell'eternità* (Milan, 1987), deals in part with the symbolism of the Eucharist, at once food and body.

⁵ See especially M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (English trans., Cambridge, Mass., 1968). On him, D. LaCapra, 'Bakhtin, Marx and the Carnavalesque' in his *Rethinking Intellectual History* (Ithaca and London, 1983), ch. 5.

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Structuralism is another important ingredient in Camporesi's conceptual soup, in both its Russian and French varieties (represented by Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss). Something of Antonio Gramsci and Gaston Bachelard has also gone into the pot. This heady mixture is powdered with references to Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and other socio-cultural historians. However, the interpretations remain more or less within the folklore tradition. Giants are symbols of fertility, round cakes served at funerals represent resurrection, the kitchen is a sacred space, cooking is a ritual, and the chimney a tunnel communicating with the supernatural world (it is not difficult to predict how Camporesi would interpret the English folklore of Father Christmas).

Plain empiricist historians may find this mixture a little difficult to swallow. Hermeneutics, like its sister iconography, must be intuitive in the last resort, but one wishes that Camporesi would show a little more awareness of the possibility of alternative interpretations of his data. All the same, no one interested in popular culture or in symbolism can afford to neglect either the wealth of material or the richness of interpretation which Camporesi offers us in his remarkable shelf of books.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Where necessary, to aid understanding of the original text, I have added explanatory material. This is indicated by the use of italicized square brackets. In the case of quotations, I have taken already-existing English translations or versions, as close as possible in time to the Italian original, with the two-fold purpose of illustrating English contemporary interest in the topics under discussion in this book and of conveying the flavour of the Italian quotations themselves.

T. C.-M.