

STEPHAN F. EBERT & GERRIT JASPER SCHENK (eds.), *Vom Buch aufs Feld – vom Feld ins Buch. Verflechtungen von Theorie und Praxis in Ernährung und Landwirtschaft (ca. 1300-1600)*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2024, 418 pp., 43 illustrations, 4 tables.

It almost sounds like a chicken-egg-discussion: Did agricultural theories pave the way for farming practices or rather the other way around? These proceedings of a conference, held in monastery Lorsch – an appropriate venue since some chapters deal with monasterial settings – try to find out how practical and theoretical agricultural knowledge about food and/or agriculture were intertwined.

The chronological demarcation of this book (1300-1600) appears fruitful and promising for this combination of food history with epistemological research, since some eminent historical changes with huge consequences for food, health, and agriculture occurred in this very period: The Little Ice Age, the Great Famine, the Black Death, the rediscovery of Antiquity (including ancient scholarship), and the Columbian Exchange, to mention only a few. The invention of book printing, obviously, was another revolutionary moment regarding the dissemination of knowledge. From one year to another, existing knowledge literally precipitated in print and started to circulate all around Europe, thus accelerating the exchange of insights.

The volume consists of two parts, each counting five contributions. The focus in the first section, “Plants, Practices, Knowledge”, lies upon the interaction between practical and theoretical knowledge with regard to growing crops. The second section, “Archives, sources, texts”, presents relevant archive holdings and text categories that convey the very foundations of our knowledge about historical processes of appropriation and transformation in food and agronomy. Aligned with our readership, this review primarily focuses on the agricultural chapters, with a brief discussion of the food-related sections¹.

The first contribution by historian Maximilian Schuh deals with new land management methods in late medieval England as a showcase how monasteries and ec-

¹ A review of the more food-related chapters of this edited volume is forthcoming in the journal *Food & History*.

clesiastical estates coped with drastic climatic changes, such as intensified rainfall and falling temperatures. These new agrobusiness models found their way in agronomic treatises, offering practical guidance on farming techniques and estate management also to secular estates and turned out to be influential up until the 16th century. The following chapter by historian Christian Stadelmaier presents research on how two male Cistercian monasteries in Germany may have been instrumental in diffusing practical knowledge on fertilizing techniques with dung mixed up with hay or straw to their tenants. The contribution, which excels in verbosity, also tries to link rather unelaborated evidence on historical protests against alleged cases of agricultural overexploitation with fashionable contemporary debates on sustainability, without making any valid argument and without being to the point. (This reader at least missed both of them.)

Exceptionally well-written and a showpiece of solid argumentation and research is the chapter, written by historian Stephan Ebert. It starts, almost like a novel, with a scene from 1490 in Eberbach Abbey – after all the filming location of of Eco's *The name of the rose* – where the inventory of the infirmary kitchen is due. By analyzing a rather unexpected kitchen item, i.e. a rice pan, it unveils the multi-faceted lore surrounding rice. Where to start? The contribution consists of two parts. The first section presents a rice-based case-study of the way how culinary-dietetic theory and practice were interconnected in the Rheingau area, whereas the second part zooms out on the wider region of the Upper Rhine Valley and the so-called Illyric climate region (current subalpine Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia). These German-speaking regions turned out to be propitious to cultivate novel and trendy foodstuff from the Mediterranean and the “New” World. Experiments in producing asparagus, pasta, peaches, maize, saffron, tobacco, hop, and turkey were monitored and documented by practitioners, thus initiating a mutual exchange between local, informal knowledge and academic circles, even up to today. An interesting example is the Croatian Zagorje region which is since the 16th century reputed for breeding turkeys, a heritage which resulted in 2014 in the status of PDO.

The second part thus complements the micro-study on rice by providing the necessary contextualization on food trends and other enabling factors which were in some cases directly retraceable to Eberbach Abbey. The mere presence and – even more – the proves of use of an incunable of Platina's *De honesta voluptate et valitudine* in the abbey's library bears witness to the interaction between dietetic theory and culinary practice. In other words, the rice pan figuring in inventories and handled by infirmary cooks was anything but casual: It refers to medical use, prestige (since the infirmary kitchen on special occasions also catered guests, significantly also with blanc-manger based on almonds and... rice), and not the least to symbolics, white being the color of purity and, as such, a core value of the Cistercian order.

Chapter four, written by geographer Andreas Dix, discusses late medieval Bamberg as a stronghold for growing licorice, vegetables and especially vegetable seeds. In his article, the Franconian town exemplifies the (widespread premodern) phenomenon of urban agriculture. What made Bamberg horticulture quite unique was both its site (intra muros) and its versatile and high-profile product range. Most final products from licorice to vegetables and especially vegetable seeds of predominantly local varieties were deliberately aimed at high-end consumers. This strategy ensured

more added value, paving the way for an agro-commercial success story even in the 14th century, a period generally considered as a period of decline.

The subsequent and final chapter of the first part, written by historian Gerrit Jasper Schenk, remains within the field of horticulture and of special crops (e.g. asparagus, tobacco, flax, madder, wine, leguminous, woad). It examines the Upper Rhine valley with its warmer climate as a permanent laboratory for agro- and horticultural transformation processes between the 8th and the 18th century. The decision to opt for a *longue durée* perspective pays off methodologically, since it enables identifying long-term trends versus periods of accelerated change. The article can be read as a crash-course through a thousand years of crisis adaptation, which, in view of current ecological crises, provides some comfort. The contribution shows that horticulture as a spatially rather demarcated and better controllable practice proved to be particularly propitious for experiments. Schenk moreover argues that the interaction between local socio-cultural sites, such as monasteries, courts, and cities (as printing centers) on the one hand and socio-natural actors or practitioners on the other hand was quite dynamic, suggesting a high degree of interconnectedness between practice and theory.

The second part of the volume opens with a contribution by philologist Almut Mikeleitits-Winter, which belongs, in my modest opinion, to one of the best chapters. It presents a hitherto unknown epitome of Anthimus' *De observatione ciborum* from a monastery in Buch on the Mulde, conserved in a convolute, which, significantly, reveals information about its function. Starting with the origins of this dietary compendium in 5th and 6th century Byzantium via its vivid reception in Carolingian monasteries and ending as a vademecum, used by Cistercian monks colonizing central Saxony, it offers an intriguing example of how Graeco-Roman dietary expertise throughout the ages was adapted and "translated" to new food, agro-economic, and medical realities. Despite lengthy explanations on whether early-medieval German or ancient local dialects can provide into adequate equivalents of ancient Greek and Latin terms, the chapter reads even for an early modernist relatively easily and occasionally contains witty elements, such as practical advice how to prepare bear's meat medically responsibly – always useful now that the category of noble savage is experiencing a remarkable comeback.

This huge tempo-spatial and thematical span alone could arguably already provide enough stuff for a long article if not for a monograph (as the impressive plurilingual bibliography also suggests). Astonishingly, the author complements her intertextual and book-scientific approach with input on material and even tangible aspects of local monastic life around 1200, by reconstructing its architectural, economic, and food historical circumstances. According to Mikeleitits-Winter, archaeo-historical research on site possibly provides evidence for the thesis that local meat-consumption – as such problematic for Cistercians and therefore discussed in this very epitome, which in its very editorial constellation unveils various traces of practical use – was by way of exception allowed, either for people under medical treatment in the infirmary or for knights and aristocratic guests passing by. Both the textual and contextual pre-requisites for this hypothesis seem to be given. In doing so, the article *en passant* also brings us closer to answering the vexed question of whether dietary treatises were heeded in everyday life.

Chapter seven by librarian Helmut Klug basically presents CoReMa, an online database of late medieval German cooking recipes, and its relevance in transmitting agricultural knowledge. It concludes that this significance is rather reduced: For one, because applied kitchen knowledge is traditionally predominantly orally diffused, but also because the collected recipes completely neglect everyday life as they only represent upper-class cuisine. Nevertheless, they occasionally contain technical information on how basics (e.g. starch) were prepared, how food was preserved, but also on which species were known and used.

The subsequent contribution by historian Stefan Sonderegger discusses documentary aspects of agricultural specialization around 15th century St. Gallen. Using specific archival holdings (i.e. interest and account books), conclusions can be drawn about the structure of local agriculture. The article argues how three regions, each having their own specialization (wine, crop and livestock farming) were at the same time mutually interdependent in terms of labor division and resources. The driving forces behind this ecosystem were in most cases landlord institutions and urban citizens with property on the countryside. But much more than merely offering a marketplace, urban players, such as, for example, the St. Gallen hospital, served as a hub of regional exchange and provided peasants with resources they commonly lacked (including credits).

The penultimate contribution by philologist Thomas Gloning examines three types of German documents on agronomy until 1600 from a textual point of view: translations, original texts, and one-issue literature (e.g. on wine making). With two exceptions, German agricultural literature until ca. 1600 consisted, essentially, of translations of Greek, Latin, Italian, or French treatises, a phenomenon reminiscent of other professional fields, e.g. architecture. Only since 1591 the first original texts in German began to circulate (Johannes Coler, Martin Großer, and Abraham von Thumbshirn). However, compared to other professional handbooks, agricultural texts barely contained multimodal elements, such as illustrations.

The last chapter by archivist Antonio Sánchez de Mora concerns a translated article on the Sevilla-based *Archivo General de Indias* and its relevance for research on the transformation of agriculture, ecosystems, and foodways in the aftermath of the “Columbian Exchange”. Though geographically standing remarkably apart from the rest of the volume, it offers some interesting insights. Sources from the trading house (founded 1503) contain, amongst others, detailed information on colonizers, bringing new species of plants and animals to America for agricultural aims. The archives of the Indian council (since 1524) rather hold documentation on specific regions, for example on experiments with cultivating new crops, but also on indigenous farming models and local food habits. Even back then, the indigenous people of Florida preferred turtles, whales, tuna and sea snails to eating their pets. Thanks to the reporting obligation, we now know to what extent the introduction of wheat, olives, fruit, vegetables, herbs and livestock was successful or rather disastrous (logistically or ecologically), whether indigenous people integrated foreign elements in their foodways and whether colonizers adapted to local foodways.

Al in all, this volume offers interesting reflections on agronomy at the intersection of theory and practice. Each article lists its own bibliography, which is generally up-to-date; however, Mauro Ambrosoli’s seminal work *The wild and the sown. Botany*

and agriculture in Western Europe 1350-1850 (Turin 1992 resp. Cambridge 1997) is notably absent. While some contributions in terms of readability would have profited from more severe editing, the final editing by the publisher could also have been more accurate. Besides one rather substantial omission (a missing page, which has already been corrected, since – as the publisher assured me – a new edition is in the loop), there are also quite a few forgivable minor errors and typos that were nonetheless not unavoidable.

RENGENIER C. RITTERSMA

