

Consumption, trade and innovation: exploring the botanical remains from the Roman and Islamic ports at Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt

By Marijke van der Veen. Frankfurt-am-Main: Africa Magna Verlag, 2011. Pp. xiii+313. 104 b/w illustrations, 16 colour plates, 42 tables. Hardback €69.80, ISBN 978-3-937248-23-3.

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Botanical exchanges have been of interest to world history since Alan Crosby published *The Columbian exchange* in 1972, with Andrew Watson's 1983 *Agricultural innovation in the early Islamic world* and Henry Hobhouse's 1992 *Seeds of change* marking further milestones in the development of this particular perspective on human societies and cross-cultural contacts. Archaeological data have always provided an important dataset for the study of botanical exchanges and a considerable body of specialist archaeological literature has developed, yet there are few books that bridge the historical and the archaeological. Marijke van der Veen's *Consumption, trade and innovation* is arguably one of the few to do so, and that for one of the most neglected and yet exciting periods of botanical exchange, before 1500 CE. This may not be a traditional read for global and world historians but it is an excursion well worth making.

Between 1999 and 2003 excavations by the University of Southampton at the port site of Quseir on the Red Sea recovered truly startling quantities of well-preserved food remains and wood from both the early Roman and the medieval Islamic periods. This book presents the botanical remains, a huge dataset of just under 68,000 samples and individual botanical remains, together with lesser numbers of wooden artefacts and charcoal samples, which together represent ninety-five different crops and around thirty identified woods originating from across Eurasia and Africa. Here are vegetables as common as onions and garlic; a huge range of staples such as rice, taro, millet, and sorghum; fruits such as citrus, banana, and watermelon; and a huge variety of spices, including pepper, ginger, turmeric, cardamom, and betelnut. As the author underlines, this is one of the richest archaeobotanical assemblages in the world and many of these finds are archaeological firsts; however, it is made doubly

significant by the port's position at the intersection of Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean and its activity, on and off, for almost 1400 years. Starting from this primary dataset, *Consumption, trade and innovation* sets itself the remarkably ambitious aim to 'enhance our understanding of the nature, scale and impact of the trade in foodstuffs and to shed light on a more human aspect of the trade, namely that of the lives of the merchants and other inhabitants of the port' (p. 1). The resulting volume manages to combine the kind of analytical and quantitative data that archaeologists look for, rigorously explained throughout the chapters and neatly set out in the volume's forty-two tables and seventeen appendices, with a more readable exploration of the evidence that these botanical remains provide for the trade and consumption of foodstuffs, and for agricultural innovation.

Faced with such a mass of data the book sets itself clear and discrete goals. Chapter 2 focuses on imported spices as culinary and medicinal commodities; adopting the broad classical and medieval definitions of 'spices' this chapter regroups both what we now think of as 'classic' luxury spices such as pepper and cardamom with 'exotics' such as coconuts, mung beans, or myroballans. In Chapter 3 the author gathers together the so-called 'summer crops', plants as varied as sugar cane, rice, or bananas, which originated in tropical or sub-tropical areas of Africa and South or Southeast Asia but were introduced into local agricultural systems in the Middle East and Mediterranean. Meticulous analysis of these plant remains, together with new data on these crops, and medieval agriculture more generally, allows van der Veen to offer a much needed revision of Watson's thesis of an early Islamic agricultural revolution.

Chapter 4 turns to food and foodways, examining food consumption and disposal over time and within the spatial setting of the ports. Throughout the chapters van der Veen makes abundant use of contemporary written sources, notably classical and Middle Eastern travel accounts and cookery books, the recently published 'India Book' material from the Cairo Geniza, and a huge secondary literature spanning archaeology, botany, and history in a way rarely seen in the archaeology or food history of the Indian Ocean area. The encounter between archaeological and historical approaches is not always easy and the fractures this provokes usefully highlight their differing disciplinary taxonomies. Historians may be surprised to find meat and fish missing from the book's treatment of diet. Conversely, they may find it odd that animal fodder and woodworking are

included at all in a study of diet and the food trade. These apparent anomalies result, however, from the fact that archaeologists treat botanical and faunal remains separately. Nevertheless, such divisions create an awkwardness that the author might have done more to overcome. Van der Veen's study is but part of a wider programme of research and publication on the Myos Hormos and Quseir finds, including materials as diverse as leather, matting and basketry, ships timbers, textiles, documents on paper, and an equally wide variety of faunal remains.⁵

These differences of academic culture should not dissuade historians from this book, nor should the occasional quibble one might raise with the range of written sources used or their interpretation. This is a book that bravely breaks the mould and attempts a hugely bold enterprise. If Crosby set the Columbian exchange as a watermark in food globalization, and if new archaeological and linguistic data is revealing the complexity of crop circulation across Eurasia and Africa from as early as the third millennium BCE, van der Veen's study demonstrates that the first millennium and a half of the Common Era were no less vital. *Consumption, trade and innovation* illuminates in a unique way the richness and complexity of botanical exchanges and human–plant interactions between Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean, and it opens the door for a generation of new research into this understudied time and place.

Transnational networks: German migrants in the British empire, 1670–1914

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Migration history and network studies figure prominently in national and transnational historiographies, albeit with different implications. In national histories, the emphasis is often on emigration and

immigration as well as on the construction of barriers between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', while the focus in transnational approaches is on networks of merchants, intellectuals, or travellers that sustained economic, cultural, or social links with less regard for administrative or geographical barriers. Bringing these points of view together has great potential but also faces significant hurdles: a major insight from one perspective may look like an interesting footnote in very small print from another.

Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, John R. Davis, and Stefan Manz are authors of important monographs on Germans in Britain, and experts on international migration, transnational merchant networks, and the treatment of minorities. In 2007 they edited a collection of essays on migration and transfer from Germany to Britain; this volume expands their perspective to encompass the British empire as a whole. The volume's aim is to use the German example to show that outside influences shaped Britain's imperial project significantly, and that British imperial history is therefore a transnational topic. The first chapter, by Mark Häberlein on colonial-era Pennsylvania, is one of the collection's highlights and sets out the possible dimensions of cooperation and influence. Häberlein identifies four types of actors involved in the mass migration of Germans to this part of North America: land speculators and immigration agents, head hunters seeking to attract personnel for industrial undertakings, go-betweens carrying information and goods from one side of the Atlantic to the other, and Protestant clergymen who served as intellectual mediators. As an expert on both Germany and North America, Häberlein is careful to calibrate the relevance of German actors by charting success as well as failure, and by comparing the German presence in the British empire to the impact that Germans had in French, Dutch, or Spanish ports focused on trade with America.

Margrit Schulte Beerbühl's approach is different. Building on her magisterial study of German merchants in Britain (published in German in 2007), she assesses the contribution of (mostly London-based) merchants of German origin to the transatlantic trade in textiles, slaves, and tobacco, as well as to Anglo-Indian trade. The conclusions vary widely. Whereas German linen cloth was a key British re-export to North America, the subchapters on other economic sectors describe a more marginal presence in the UK, which was in turn frequently only one building block of individual merchant families' efforts to establish pan-European networks.

5 For these, see relevant contributions in David Peacock and Lucy Blue, eds., *Myos Hormos – Quseir al-Qadim: Roman and Islamic ports on the Red Sea*, 2 vols., Oxford: Oxbow Books/Archaeopress, 2006–11.