

**Dorothee Rippmann and Brigitta Neumeister-Taroni, eds.** *Gesellschaft und Ernaehrung um 1000*. Eine Archaeologie des Essens, Accompanying volume to the exhibition . Vevey: Fondation Alimentarium, 2000. 288 pp. Illustrations bibliography. 28 Swiss Franken, ISBN 2-940-284-05-9.

Reviewed by **Verena Winiwarter**, Institute for Anthropology, University of Vienna.

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The recently renovated Food Museum in Vevey, Switzerland (sponsored by Nestlé), housed an exhibition on the history of food running from spring to autumn, 2000. The lavishly illustrated book which accompanied it can stand as a work of its own and is a welcome addition to the still small-sized library of those with an interest in the environmental history of the Middle Ages. The book was not planned as an environmental history, rather as a social history of food (and not just nutrition), but serves the environmentally interested well. After an introduction by the curator of the exhibition and co-editor of the volume, Dorothee Rippmann, seven themes are presented: (1) Mundane food and celestial nourishment, (2) Climate--Population--Expansion, (3) Society and Settlement Structures (4) The language of food and social meaning (5) Agriculture--Gathering--Horticulture, (6) The kitchen and the pleasures of Dining--to have one's own hearth, (7) Natural sciences tracing the past: Humans--Animals--Environment. It is clear from the titles that environmental concerns are especially found in parts 2, 3, 5 and 7.

Both overviews and detailed studies are included in the book, the latter coming mostly from two excavations presented in detail in various chapters.

Edited collections are often considered second-class and exhibition catalogues share this suspicion. Can a collection of essays ever be as good as a monograph? Can a book by twenty-one authors and divided into twenty-five chapters be a good collection of essays? Yes, it can. It can even demonstrate the potential of interdisciplinary work. The authors come from archaeology, history and (German) linguistics as well as from several of the archaeo-natural sciences, such as archaeobotany, archaeozoology, -ichthyology, -akarology, dendrochronology and physical anthropology. With such a degree of sophistication and knowledge about details, one might fear that the book would be rendered unreadable. By no means. It is a profound, learned, but very readable book. The carefully chosen, high-quality illustrations merit special mention. Not only students will enjoy the wealth of colorful pictures telling their own story for those who want to look closely.

The main message of the book comes across easily: Food is not just nutritional facts; it is a vector of social coherence, a representation of status and power, and food cannot be understood without its social dimension. Social dimensions usually are researched by studying texts, charters, wills, annals and the like, and by studying pictures. It cannot well be researched in the tenth century in this way. Around the first millennium, continental Europeans did not write very much, and a considerable proportion of their writing has vanished. Archaeology is therefore the main source of information about food at this time. The main achievement

of the volume is the methodically innovative and well-informed use of non-textual sources to study the social makeup of society.

Not all articles are of the same quality. The archaeological and especially those with a focus on natural sciences are particularly excellent, whereas the overview about agriculture given by George Comet tries too much in too small a space. An essay on agricultural techniques alone would perhaps have served the reader better. The omission of a chapter on salt, a foodstuff of pre-eminent importance, is probably due to the lack of sources and archaeological evidence, but a short chapter would have given salt the visibility it needs.

In many instances, the book corrects common misconceptions of the monotonous diet of the Middle Ages, arguing convincingly that even peasants in the early middle ages, prior to the great increase in population we find after 1200, had access to a balanced diet comprising meat. The difference between the first and second part of the Middle Ages has been pointed out many times in recent years, and this catalogue makes a strong case in point.

Marlu Kühn, archaeobotanist, uses the theoretical concept of "minimization of risk" to interpret the variety of cereals found in excavations. Massimo Montanari, historian of pigs and pork as well as of hunger in the middle ages, discusses adaptationist explanations for the increase in areas planted with cereals as a result of population increase. Other theoretical frameworks would be welcome in this case. The works of Ester Boserup and Robert Netting,[1] which would allow for a more elaborate discussion of the pronounced increase in cereal farming, are missing in the bibliography,

along with others written in English. The bibliography is good, but would be excellent, had the English literature been given the same attention as that in French and Italian. The great gap between the two language families still exists and is visible in scholarship. Despite the achievements of the book, it does not forestall the need for a comprehensive monograph on food, population and environment in the early middle ages. In such a volume, salt could be given due attention, as well as the history of climate in the Early Middle Ages, which is by now quite well researched. Essays on the combination of food with other social activities such as games like chess, and more general ideas in society, such as the difference between the wild and the tame, should by all means be kept in the desired book for a more specialized audience.

## Notes

[1]. Ester Boserup, *The conditions of agricultural growth* (Chicago, 1965); Ester Boserup, "Agricultural Development and Demographic Growth: a conclusion," in *Evolution agraire et croissance dmographique*, ed. Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux (Lige, 1987) pp. 385-389; Robert Netting, McC., *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and the Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Stanford, 1993).

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