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Paul H. Freedman. *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. x + 275 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11199-6.

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The Rise and Fall of Spices

As Paul Freedman notes in the introductory chapter of this volume, an enormous historical literature treats the medieval spice trade and its pivotal role in stimulating western Europeans to undertake deep-water exploration and establish colonial enterprises. But this literature is concerned primarily with the supply side, with how to circumvent Muslim and Venetian middlemen. Freedman proposes instead to focus on the demand side, on "why spices were so popular in the first place, why they were sufficiently sought after for traders to bring them to Europe from what seemed the farthest corners of the world" (p. 2). And this is what he does, especially in the first three chapters. Chapters 4 through 6 provide details on how the spice trade worked in the Middle Ages, how lack of knowledge of and control over their sources whetted Europeans' desire to eliminate the middlemen, and how voices raised against conspicuous consumption of spices had little effect on their use. Having established how and why Europeans were so eager to pay high prices for an enormous variety of spices, Freedman then cannot resist retelling the tale, in chapters 7 and 8, of how government-backed expeditions set out to find and gain control of sources through exploration and conquest. These two chapters are well documented and engagingly narrated, but they cover material likely to be familiar to historians as well as to many general readers. Finally, in a concluding chapter, he chronicles the decline of demand for spices in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and their disappearance from world trade as commodities that countries would go to war to control. The work is primarily narrative rather than analytical, but general readers will enjoy it no less for that.

While previewing his main arguments in the introductory chapter, Freedman quickly dispenses with the old chestnut that spices were so popular in the Middle Ages because they helped preserve meat and cover up spoilage. He notes that salting, pickling, smoking, or air-curing were much more effective means of preservation. More importantly, the price of spices so exceeded that of fresh meat that it would have made no economic sense at all to use them for anything other than as enhancements of cuisine, as drugs, and as aromatics. Above all, they were "prized as consumer goods by the affluent" (p. 2). In addition to black pepper, cinnamon, ginger, and saffron, such spices as galangal, zedoary, long pepper, and "grains of paradise" (malagueta pepper from West Africa) were commonly used in medieval cookery, along with sugar, which only later became the commodity that we know today. These, along with many others, including even ground mummy, were used as medicinal drugs, while expensive aromatic resins and animal products such as ambergris, castoreum, musk, and civet were used as fragrances, both for aesthetic and for medical reasons.

Of these, only saffron could be found readily in Europe. It remains expensive today, primarily because of the difficulty of harvesting it and the large number of stamens required to make a commercially viable amount. Most of the others have all but vanished from the European table. Freedman also draws an important distinction between spices and herbs. Spices, because of the long transit time from their origins in unknown parts of the world, were sold in dried form, while herbs were raised locally and used fresh. Herbs, though also used in cuisine, were especially important in medicine, not least because their use was not limited to the affluent.

Chapter 1, on the use of spices in medieval cuisine, draws its primary evidence from medieval cookbooks and from accounts of meals served on special occasions. For the modern reader (or eater), the most notable feature of medieval cookbooks is the large amount and variety of spices used in individual dishes, especially in the form of elaborate sauces. Individuals working for the wealthiest

and most powerful families produced most of the surviving cookbooks. The overwhelming impression is of cooks trying to outdo each other in ostentation and presentation, with less concern about how the dishes might have tasted. Even people of moderate wealth, however, appear to have spent amounts of money on spices that seem alien to modern consumers. Freedman can demonstrate this point with recipes from a late fourteenth-century Parisian book of housekeeping that contains more than four hundred recipes. Tips for simplifying recipes and saving on excessive use of spices notwithstanding, elaborate banquet recipes are included that seem hardly less grand than those of the highest nobles. He also cites examples of anecdotes illustrating how peasants were made fun of by showing how they were completely unused to spices other than pepper.

Above all, the use of large quantities of expensive spices underlined a family's social status, and Freedman provides detailed descriptions of meals prepared for specific occasions that highlight this point. To give just one example, a series of banquets on the occasion of the 1476 marriage of Duke George "the Rich" of Bavaria to Princess Jadwiga of Poland required: "386 pounds of pepper, 286 of ginger, 207 of saffron, 205 of cinnamon, 105 of cloves, and a mere 85 pounds of nutmeg" (p. 6). As for the source of the fascination with highly spiced cuisine, Freedman argues that it was already well established in Roman times. What differed in medieval Europe was simply the availability of more spices through the Muslim trading networks. The chapter on cuisine is, appropriately, the longest in the book.

In his discussion of spices as medicinal drugs (chapter 2), Freedman shows how the humoral balance sought in medieval medical theory inevitably led cuisine and medicine to interact. While each spice, herb, and foodstuff was thought theoretically to have its own qualities (hot, cold, wet, dry) in one of four degrees, these considerations were seldom rigidly applied in the preparation of foods. Herbals (handbooks for treating illnesses) were more likely to follow humoral guidelines in recommending what herb or spice to use for a particular complaint. Here, perhaps to a greater degree than Freedman explicitly states, the use of imported spices was overlaid on an older tradition of herbal medicine after the translation of key Arabic texts into Latin in the transition from the early to the High Middle Ages. More importantly, importation of spices for medicinal purposes played an important role in the rise of the drug seller. And the more affluent members of society could best afford to purchase spices, often in the form of complex potions.

The third chapter outlines the use of the odors given off by spices. Freedman notes that only a small amount of the spices imported to Europe were used for medicine or perfume, but "fragrance, even more than gastronomy, explains the allure of spices because perfume ... joined together so many appealing effects" (p. 76). Scents could heighten sexual attraction and bring down the wrath of moralists, yet they were also symbols of holiness and central elements of church services. The desire for fragrances to counteract the foul smells of medieval urban life readily explains one of their uses, but long traditions associating saintliness and good smells were no doubt also important. Indeed, it was a commonplace that the bodies of saints gave off sweet odors when they decomposed. Fragrant spices thus provided analogs. Europeans did not know where spices came from, and it was widely believed that valuable substances, including gemstones as well as spices, were swept down the rivers of Asia and Africa from their origins in Paradise. Even as the first European travelers ventured into Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the legendary Christian kingdom of Prester John continued to captivate the imagination of Europeans because its discovery might open direct access to the sources of spices without reliance on infidel traders. As Freedman notes, Pope Alexander III sent an emissary to search for Prester John in 1177 (he was never heard from again), and in 1497 Vasco da Gama carried letters to him from the King of Portugal.

Chapters 4 through 6 deal respectively with details and history of the existing spice trade; with factors that determined scarcity, abundance, and profit for the traders; and with voices that condemned spices as immoral luxuries. It is important to keep in mind that Europe was a peripheral market. From the sources in South and southeastern Asia to the markets in China, India, and the Islamic world, only a small percentage of the overall global trade ultimately found its way to Europe. This meant that Europeans were dependent on the predominantly Arab middlemen from whom they obtained spices, but they had no direct knowledge of or control over the supply fluctuations that might influence these markets. Only rarely, as during the brief period of Mongol hegemony in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, did Europeans have limited direct access to East Asian markets. Freedman uses numerous examples from extant documents to provide details of how the trade worked, who the most important traders were, and how spices were distributed at the retail level. He also discusses the important issue of fraud and adulteration. While prices fluctuated over time, it is obvious from the extant records that a great variety of spices were avail-

able but at very high prices.

In the fifth chapter, Freedman discusses the nature of scarcity itself: it can be intrinsic (there is not much of something), circumstantial (the desired item needs to be transported to where it is desired), or artificial (the supply is deliberately restricted by human action). He gives detailed examples of each kind of scarcity, but the main reason for approaching the topic in this way is to suggest that Europeans eventually became convinced that they could eliminate the traders and make enormous profits themselves by getting direct access to the sources of spices.

Chapter 6 is a bit of a lull in the coming storm, a retarding moment before Freedman plunges into the story of how Europeans came to take over the global trade in spices. With examples ranging from Ulrich von Hutten to Dante Alighieri and especially to Geoffrey Chaucer, Freedman shows how the unseemly use of spices, especially in ostentatious preparation of food, could outrage medieval moralists. Even monasteries came in for a fair share of bitter comment for their overindulgence in expensive ingredients when simpler fare was available. All of this of course did little to dampen the market.

In chapters 7 and 8, Freedman retells the story of the voyages of exploration and the military conquest that led to the establishment of colonial empires. As noted earlier, these chapters provide a lot of interesting details, but they cover more familiar ground than that narrated in the first six chapters. Nonetheless, the presentation of the stories of discovery and conquest are well integrated with the previous discussions. They provide a final arch to the narrative that helps explain why European nations were willing to expend so much life and treasure to get control of the spice trade.

In a concluding chapter, we learn just how quickly everything changed. In the course of the seventeenth century, French gastronomy came to reject the heavy use of spices in favor of rich, creamy sauces flavored only with a modicum of herbs. Within just a few generations, heavily spiced foods came to be associated with a lack of sophistication. Sugar was largely banished from main courses, but it soon became a commodity consumed by everyone in the British Isles as new sources of production caused its price to plunge. As Freedman notes: "when we look at the Middle Ages the real mystery is not why spices were popular, but why later, after a millennium of continuous popularity, they dropped out of favor" (p. 221). As humoral medicine came to be discredited, the medicinal use of spices also declined, though these were never as important as the use of spices in cuisine. In the introductory chapter Freedman had already noted, "in the summer of 2004, Hurricane Frances destroyed the nutmeg crop of Granada [*sic*], the largest producer of this spice, yet the world financial system did not tremble" (p. 3).

Extensive footnotes, a bibliography of over three hundred items, and an excellent index round out the volume. In addition to three maps, there are eighteen illustrations, all but two of which are drawn from medieval manuscripts or maps. Thirteen original texts containing recipes and descriptions are interspersed throughout the book, set off in boxes and italicized to mark them as source material. An additional one summarizes information from a manuscript. These range from a full page to just a few lines, and they lend an aura of authenticity to the narrative by providing illustrative examples for the reader.

Freedman presents his arguments throughout with analysis of extant documents and with detailed examples. The reader is sometimes left with a welter of images but without an easy way to decide what is typical and what is unusual. Here we get to the fundamental problem of narrative history. We must rely on the integrity and rhetorical skills of the narrator to build a convincing case. Freedman is largely successful in doing so, though the examples drawn from medieval cookbooks might profitably have been compared to the moderation usually counseled in regimens of health, a genre of medieval text that was more common than cookbooks.

Finally, Freedman often refers to contemporary phenomena as analogs to the points he is making. These are sometimes humorous but they also serve to make serious points. Here are just a few examples:

"A freezer was an emblem of prosperity in the 1950s but is no longer, and chicken is now cheap whereas it was considered a treat in the 1920s. As this is being written, flat-screen televisions are making the transition from show-off to routine items" (p. 7);

"In general, first class loses some of its allure if ordinary people can upgrade to it easily; a 'gold' credit card means nothing if everyone possesses several of them" (p. 43);

"The perceived cleanliness of the body's interior was perhaps more important [in the Middle Ages] than its exterior, rather than vice versa as today; the laxative more important than the moisturizer" (p. 52).

Such examples effectively bring the dynamic at the basis of the relationship between the attractiveness of spices and their rarity in premodern Europe home to the

reader. On balance, Freedman has written a masterful synthesis of research from many different branches of economic, social, political, and textual history. Occasionally, some of the detail from particular texts makes for slow going, but the reader is ultimately rewarded with additional insights and with an overall perspective that makes it worthwhile to keep on reading.

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