



Fabien Faucheron. *Nourrir la ville : Ravitaillement, marchés et métiers de l'alimentation à Venise dans les derniers siècles du Moyen Âge.* Rome: École française de Rome, 2014. xxv + 885 pp. EUR 59.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-7283-0936-8.

Reviewed by Corey Tazzara

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Commissioned by Matt Vester (West Virginia University)

The peculiar situation of Venice was first noted by Cassiodorus in 537-38 CE. He was impressed with the city built on the “wide expanse of the waters.” Even more, he was impressed by a people who “have one notion of plenty, that of gorging themselves with fish,” and from similarity of diet and the common challenges of managing a complex ecology, the Roman official deduced the principle of social equality.[1] Here was the kernel of the myth of Venice. Later observers also marveled at this people who *non arat, non seminat, non vindemiat*: who do not work, sow, or vintage (p. 2n7). By then, of course, Venice was one of the premier commercial cities in the Mediterranean world.

The intellectual gauntlet tossed down by Cassiodorus fifteen hundred years ago has been taken up by Fabien Faucheron in his monograph on provisioning medieval Venice. Studies on Venetian economic life abound, even if they have grown infrequent in recent years, but they focus on the city’s long-distance commerce and luxury trade, or on the spread of export-oriented industry in Venice and its subject cities, or, finally, on the trade in money and credit at the commanding heights of the economy.[2] But there is good reason to focus on the humble commodities of everyday life. Venice was the third largest city in Christendom, with a population peaking at over a hun-

dred thousand inhabitants. A study of its alimentary system reveals much about the realities of urban existence in the Middle Ages. In addition, given Venice’s commercial achievements, it also provides an unparalleled window into one of the era’s most complex and influential marketplaces. Faucheron, in this meticulously researched volume, makes full use of both possibilities.

Faucheron exploits an impressive variety of sources; as I am neither a Venetianist nor a medievalist, I cannot determine whether he has missed any documentation, but the impression is one of exhaustion. He considers not only the normative material in which Venice abounds, and which has been raked over by previous scholars; but also judicial sources, extant guild records, tantalizing fragments from correspondence and diaries, the records of the maritime firm of the Brothers Valier, and the customs records of Treviso (for a view from the hinterland). These sources form the basis for his forty-seven tables, well constructed and clear; and for his twenty or so graphs and maps. The volume is also lavished with other illustrations relating to the food trade in the city.

Faucheron’s book is a treasure mine for economic historians. It will also be of interest to other scholars whose interests take them to Venice.

Faugeron shows an abiding interest in the lives of his protagonists as well as their cultural and pragmatic ideals; and he is attentive to the realities of the urban space, as well. He even has a chapter on the formation of a distinctly Venetian cuisine. For that reason, anybody working on urban culture in medieval Italy or on Mediterranean port cities will take notice of this book.

Nourrir la ville is divided into two sections. The first examines the provisioning of the city through the lens of political economy. Chapter 1 details the administrative apparatus, linked not only to the needs of the city, but also to political developments within Venice, such as the narrowing of the patriciate and the increasing use of specialized councils. By the late Middle Ages, the bureaucracy comprised as many as 140 officials, notaries, scribes, and lesser officials. Chapter 2 examines the relationship between provisioning and the fiscal system, emphasizing the high incidence of victuals in the city's fiscal landscape. Since such taxes constituted an important tranche of the republic's revenue, and the flows of victuals varied, Venice had recourse to credit arrangements to smooth the fiscal yield. Many of these revenues were farmed, offering further scope for reflecting on the relationship between "public" and "private" in the republic. This is indeed the theme of chapter 3, which examines the effort that the Venetian Republic made to shape productive decisions within the "private sector." Faugeron argues against a Malthusian view of resource allocation, such as that championed by Georges Duby or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie; instead, Faugeron argues that fourteenth-century famines were to an extent manufactured by the marketplace, and that the market was in turn structured by the state. Interventionism was made possible not only by the material resources at the state's disposal, but also by its ideological commitment to the "public good" and its vast information network. To capture produce, Venice employed means ranging from production and customs incentives to direct purchases and the co-

ercive seizure of goods. Chapter 4 examines the republic's provisioning zone, inscribing its history within the larger Mediterranean world. This chapter, inspired by von Thünen's zonal theories, moves outward from "urban agriculture" within Venice itself—it still had fourteen vineyards, as late as c. 1325, and over four hundred gardens—to successively wider areas. It shows in meticulous detail what scholars have long argued: that the Italian mainland was fundamental to the Venetian victual economy long before it was conquered in the fifteenth century. Produce regularly arrived from as far away as the Crimea (in the fourteenth century), and more infrequently the catchment included Tunisia, the Iberian Peninsula, and even Germany. Chapter 5—described as an "epilogue" to the previous chapter—looks at the same processes from the point of view of merchants in Treviso; as well as by exploiting the commercial firm of the brothers Matteo and Stefano Valier, active in Venice in the latter half of the fifteenth century.

The second section focuses on the distribution and consumption of provisions within the city itself. Chapter 6 examines the unloading, warehousing, and marketing of produce—including the problem of contraband. Here the story is one of the complexity of arrangements for storing and moving goods within the city, while attempting to maintain fiscal control. The images taken from the famous map by Jacopo de' Barbari help the reader visualize the urban itinerary of goods. Faugeron has even tracked down the mills on the mainland where grain for the city was destined to be ground. Chapter 7 examines the professions associated with food in Venice, as well of the relationship between guilds and the state authorities. Professional boundaries were porous, in part because the victual laborers were among the poorest in the city, judging by their assets. Chapter 8 examines the intersection of various circuits of exchange, such as wholesale and retail, public and private. Faugeron shows that price formation in these supposedly distinct marketplaces were in

fact linked to one another. Here, the author reduces the “abstract marketplace” that he attributes to neoclassical economics to a number of real marketplaces, linked to specific producers, traders, or consumers. Faugeron is also attentive to the conflicts that could arise between different sectors of the economy, such as that between butchers and tanners, or between bakers and street dealers of bread. Chapter 9 looks at the development of “the consumer” as protagonist in the late Middle Ages, linked to the problem of “food security”; although neither term appears in the records, Faugeron argues that these concepts are key to understanding provisioning practice in Venice. The chapter concludes by examining the formation of a distinctly Venetian cuisine.

Nourrir la ville is a big book, literally and figuratively. It is studded not only with facts and figures, but also with illuminating forays into theoretical debates, such as how to relate the work of Amartya Sen to medieval famines. Under these circumstances there is much to learn and little to criticize. In my view, his antagonism to neoclassical economics is something of a straw man, however. He attempts to resolve the debate between anthropologists and economists with reference to his concept of pragmatism, but in my view this does not quite answer the issue. Pragmatism explains the behavior of actors and is usually contrasted with motives described as ideological, whereas the contest between anthropologists and economists focuses on how to interpret economic institutions (see pp. 634-637). In addition, the idea of an “abstract market” that he imputes to neoclassical economists has not been commonly adopted by historians. Faugeron cites Fernand Braudel on this point: but in the passages cited by Faugeron, Braudel was taking Karl Polanyi to task for oversimplifying and reifying the position of his enemies. Braudel’s point, in fact, was that no historian and few economists have ever believed that an abstract marketplace existed in historical time.[3]

One final reflection: it might have been nice had Faugeron returned in the conclusion to the myth of Venice. For if the Venetian provision system furnished the city with provisions that were “abundant, regular, and at socially acceptable costs” (p. 767), one wonders how we ought to understand the mythology surrounding Venetian political institutions in light of these facts. Certainly, this reader was left impressed not only by Faugeron’s achievement in historical reconstruction, but also of the city that provided Faugeron’s material.

Notes

[1]. *The Letters of Cassiodorus*, trans. Thomas Hodgkin (London: Henry Frowde, 1886), bk. XII, n. 24. On this letter, and on the myth of Venice, see Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant: The Horizons of a Myth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 4-5

[2]. One thinks of the studies of Frederic Lane, Reinhold Mueller, R. T. Rapp, Luca Molà, and Maria Fusaro, just to name some scholars who have published in English. The main “alimentary exception” is the work of Jean-Claude Hocquet on salt.

[3]. See Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), vol. 2, 227.

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