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EGGS IN EUROPEAN DIET: A REJOINDER

Barbara Santich sent me this comment on A.R.T. Kemasang's piece on this topic in PPC *115:*

While it is interesting to see another culture's take on one's own cultural practices, A.R.T. Kemasang's piece on the egg in European diet (*PPC* 115) goes rather too far in the direction of polemic, and contains too many unsupported assertions to be taken seriously. There are several examples of illogical conclusions. Right at the start of the article, the author says that European records are full of references to eggs. This, we are told, indicates that 'Europe, [*sic*] had difficulties feeding itself' (p. 85). That Europe, the same as every other continent, had difficulties feeding itself and was subject to periodic famines is undeniably true, but that frequent references to eggs demonstrate this is undeniably false. What is on show here is the assumption of the author that European egg consumption, contrasted with the raising of poultry for meat rather than eggs in China, is a sign of desperation. There is no further exploration of this difference in food preferences, although the subject surely merits further attention.

The simplistic argument on display here is only one example among many. Elsewhere, we see the same method of dubious conclusions from slender evidence being deployed. The central thesis is that Europeans were, and still are, barbarians whose food practices are characterized by profligacy and undisguised aggression, with a total lack of respect for the food itself and for the labour of those who produce it. Seen from Sinæan Asia, this may be true, but the argument is less than convincing because of the hyperbole and vast generalizations. The instances of 'food fights' today, illustrated by newspaper reports of the antics of pop culture celebrities or of protesters of all shades, are hardly typical of standard behaviour, no matter how much newspapers may wish to persuade us that everybody's doing it. Examples from the past are not much better: the references for egg fights lead to one single source, as the other footnotes merely take us to further comments by the author. Paston-Williams' reference to Robert May's celebrated account of the fun and games at a festive meal, used by her to illustrate the antiquity of the fictional habits of Bertie Wooster, is quoted as evidence of a European habit of 'ending banquets with food fights' (p. 91). May's text, however, involves no food whatsoever: the only item being thrown is rosewater, and the live birds and frogs released from pies hardly qualify as food. Equally unconvincing is the assertion that in Sinæan Asia, people 'up to my generation' are brought up to respect food, but that this is something which 'has no equal in the occidental world' (p. 93). In England and in France, most of the people I know were also brought up to respect food and to finish what was on their plates: woe betide those who didn't.

The text is also riddled with internal contradictions. The author quotes

Braudel to state that 'Eggs were an everyday food for the Europeans' (p 85), and a few lines further on, he takes this further, stating that 'enormous amounts of eggs of all sorts of birds were eaten everyday [*sic*] by people of all classes.' The mention of 'everyday' implies domestic poultry-keeping to maintain an adequate supply. But two pages later, we are informed that the French court in the eighteenth century 'anticipated difficulty obtaining fresh eggs', and the conclusion is that this points to an 'overall scarcity' (p. 87). If supply was such a problem, how could everyday consumption by all classes be so high?

The question of supply also arises when it comes to poultry. Kemasang asserts that 'in most of Europe until the close of the eighteenth century, domesticated fowl, particularly chicken, were still uncommon, if not quite unknown', supported by two footnotes which do nothing prove the point, and a quotation from Joan Thirsk which is hardly pertinent. This section of Thirsk's text refers to capons, not to chickens; two pages earlier, in her text on hens and chickens, she states that 'in 1500 they were the commonest birds of rich and poor, seen in every yard…' (Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England*, 2006: 251). She goes on to suggest that towards the end of the seventeenth century chickens were so common as to be unremarkable to authors of domestic advice books, the more so since the care of poultry was a female concern, neglected by the male authors of the advice manuals (Thirsk: 252).

Kemasang reiterates that chickens 'were, until early in the twentieth century, quite rare and hence very expensive' (p. 89). Paradoxically, his evidence for this is apparently paintings of genre scenes overflowing with food, described as 'misleading' as to the real state of affairs (p. 88). He mentions Beuckelaer's *Poultry Vendors* as showing a fantasy of sixteenth-century food markets in Europe overflowing with produce: fruits, vegetables and chickens. The scene (assuming he is referring to the painting now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal) shows nothing of the sort: the focus is on the four vendors, and only five birds, including one duck, are visible, along with a basket full of eggs. Of course paintings from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries showing impossibly lavish displays of foodstuffs do exist, whether by Campi in Italy, Aertsen, Beuckelaer and Snyders in the Netherlands, Louise Moillon in France, or Nathaniel Bacon in England. No serious historian would take these paintings as evidence of an abundant food supply: it strains credulity to imagine that anyone would be 'misled' by such paintings.

But Kemasang develops this specious argument further. He says that the foodstuffs in the paintings were artists' props, and from there asserts that they were so rare and expensive that if they appeared on a banquet table it was as show pieces to impress rather than to be eaten. This is a leap too far. One need look no further than (for instance) the accounts for Henry VIII's grand supper at Greenwich in 1527 to see that the Poultry bought in 360 chickens for the occasion (and chickens appeared at each of the three courses), and that

if any birds were used for show, it was the fifteen peacocks – but even these were cooked as part of the menu (National Archives, SP1/38, f. 117; British Library, MS Add. 45716A, f. 58). And the Eltham Ordinances of 1526 show that chickens, capons, hens and pullets appeared regularly, from the king's table down to those of the lesser household officials (*HO*, 1790, pp. 174–186). While chicken has indisputably moved from being something of a luxury for ordinary people, Sunday's roast chicken being a simple example, to a cheap supermarket ingredient, Kemasang's exaggerations do his argument no favours.

As well as such instances of misleading use of documents, whether paintings or text, there are also missing bibliographical details: they are given in abbreviated form in the text, but fail to appear in the list of references (Strong, Filbee). References within the text lead to the same unsupported assertion in an earlier piece by the author, one example being an anecdote about Lady Caroline Lamb (p. 92). Finally, the sloppy use of references and the sweeping generalizations are on a par with the indiscriminate use of sources, which range from academic studies to sensational items in newspapers designed to scandalize the reader with instances of modern waste or to give him a frisson at the bizarre food habits of the past. It is a pity that what could have been a very interesting investigation was abandoned in favour of polemic. All that can be learned from this piece is the author's frequent disgust at Western food habits; given the lurid anecdotes he supplies, many Westerners would be equally disgusted.

CORPUS DES RECETTES DU MOYEN-AGE

If you punch in <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSB1A5FALezDLWGbsCZoQjg> you will land on CoReMA (a bilingual acronym of the French, above, or English Cooking Recipes of the Middle Ages). Emanating from the IEHCA during lockdown or *confinement*, masterminded by the French scholar Bruno Laurioux, it consists of two full-length webinars and then three shorter films recreating specific medieval recipes. The first webinar is by Fabian Müllers, 'Alimentation et médecine au Moyen-Âge: le cas des épices.' Mr Müllers is as the Université François-Rabelais, Tours and is an experimental archaeologist (re-enactor) as well as specializing in medieval food studies. The second is given by Charles Viaut on '*De la salsamenta pictavensium* au noël de Thouars', which might be subtitled, 'In search of culinary preparations in the castles of Poitou from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries'. This last is most exciting for Prospect Books supporters as it is a study of the Durham Priory manuscript (now held at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge) discovered by Giles Gasper and Faith Wallis which can be identified as the earliest culinary manuscript in the Western tradition. The recipes are of Poitevin origin. We were going to publish this manuscript in

2014 but the project foundered on the ill-health of one of the authors. So this webinar is a useful way of assessing what we missed.

FRICOT

Fricot is so large a venture that I hesitate to embark on a description. To give the Internet coordinate would seem the quickest act: <https://fricoteurope.wordpress.com>. To quote their headline statement, 'The FRICOT PROJECT (soon to become FRICOT) is dedicated to the preservation of the world's traditional dishes, the daily delights baked and cooked with indigenous produce and local artisanal products. Local food means less food miles and more jobs, less waste of all kinds and more choices. Local food means hundreds of ingredients. Local food means sustainable food security! We started in Europe and soon we will target the continents of Africa, America and Asia, and the Pacific region including Australia, New Zealand and Polynesia.' The original behind this is Robert Allen, a journalist, author and publisher from Ireland. A part of the Project is Fricot Editions/Éditions Fricot which has an ambitious publishing programme dealing with traditional foods in Europe and Turkey, and further afield thereafter.