

BOOK REVIEWS

Juan Vicente García Marsilla, *Food Consumption in Medieval Iberia: A Socio-Economic Analysis, 13th–15th Centuries*

(London and New York: Routledge, 2022). Pages xvi + 288 + figures 26 + tables 4. £145.00 hardback.

Amanda E. Herbert 

Durham University

(Received 22 June 2023; accepted 22 June 2023)

Marsilla's *Food Consumption in Medieval Iberia* explicates the way food was made and how it was eaten across the diverse spaces of the Iberian peninsula. This was a wide region, home to many different political, religious, and cultural groups: people of different faiths, people living in different communal spaces, people in cities and people in the country, people who adhered to or were obliged to obey different ruling and governing bodies. The author shows us how some of these groups and organisations had their own unique approaches to food and drink. We learn, for example, that religious communities such as the Monastery of Santa María de Huerta in Soria, Castille, configured its kitchens in a way that was distinct from those at the Royal Palace of Sintra in Portugal; we discover the ways that granaries in the *Covetes dels Moros* of Bocairent in Valencia were fashioned, dug into the rocky hillsides in order to provide silos for storing food, and how they differed in construction and access from the raised, church-like structures that acted as *hórreo* in Valdorba, Navarre. Many small, specific examples such as these, from across the Iberian peninsula and also with occasional, comparative case studies in France, are brought together in order to produce a kaleidoscopic sense of medieval Iberian foodways.

The book is similarly expansive in its approach to time period. Much of the book's evidence, and many of its works of art, date from the fifteenth century. This is an understandable choice, with the higher survival rate of sources from this later time period, but the author is careful to include earlier evidence throughout the book to show change over time. There are frequent and important pauses to note the changes wrought by the bubonic plague pandemic of the fourteenth century, as this event had such a notable impact on food, population, and labour across the Iberian peninsula. The author's attention to matters of sickness and health is notable; in addition to traditional demographic and financial data about the Black Death, with insights into how these changed cultivation and consumption patterns, readers are offered frequent descriptions of diets for sick and injured people, so that we gain

not only a sense of macrohistorical change to food and eating in the tumult of this infamous pandemic, but also of the microhistorical change that it wrought to approaches to health and nourishment, particularly for the most vulnerable in society.

The book is organised thematically into seven chapters. The first five trace food from its site of production in forests, bodies of water, plains, and vineyards, to its site of consumption at the tables and benches of both poor and rich. The author's approach to these topics is grounded in attention to economies of demand and supply. In the first chapter, which examines the spaces and processes through which edible plants were grown, animals reared, and fish harvested, evidence is framed as a 'fight' for food. We learn how crop failures, wartime deprivations, and transportation issues often made it difficult for food to move efficiently from its site of production, and how people anchored at different stages of this process – farmers, importers, merchants, and government officials – worked, sometimes futilely, to ensure steady supplies of meat, grain, wine, and other necessities. Chapters Two and Three examine distribution. Chapters Four and Five analyse kitchens and dining tables, looking at the tools, infrastructures, and decorative objects which filled these spaces, as well as the practices of labour and of sociability which governed them. The book's third chapter, 'Avoiding the Market,' is particularly creative and insightful, arguing that most medieval people attempted, whenever possible, to sidestep and limit the influence of markets on their food supply. Working under the assumption that markets heightened inequalities and inefficiencies rather than easing them, the author shows how food storage systems, such as granaries, silos, cellars, barns, and, crucially, sites which facilitated the preservation of food, such as salt flats and salt mines, reflected and augmented extant power structures. Those who could avoid markets, by saving, protecting – and, perhaps, by hoarding – their food did so. Everyone else was left to struggle with the unreliability and unpredictability of price fluctuations, fraud, and supply chain failures.

The final two chapters of the book mark a shift from attention to the movement of food, to attention to eating habits and praxes. Chapter Six focusses on the ways that food served to differentiate lower-status and higher-status people. The final, and perhaps most ambitious, seventh chapter considers differences in Iberian foodways, highlighting the complex foodways of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. While some of these groups held similar beliefs about food – avoidance of pork, for example – the author argues that powerful cultural, spiritual, and legal imperatives warned people of different faiths away from each other's tables. Christians were forbidden from consuming meat butchered by Muslims, despite the fact that cooperation, facility-sharing, and mixed-use purchasing of meat products would have been economically beneficial to both groups. More detail on these complex and comparative foodways would have been welcome, particularly in the earlier chapters of the book, to help readers understand the limitations of the data deployed in descriptions of supply and demand, market structures, and food spaces. But the final chapter serves as a neat counterpoint to the rest of the book, and it offers an important reminder that the medieval Iberian peninsula was not homogenous. Although we often associate food with commensality, the things we eat have the power to drive us apart as much as they promise to draw us together.