

Re-thinking the spice trade and spice consumption in late Medieval and Renaissance Italy

Daniele Ognibene

“An unexpected spice hub in medieval Italy: Bologna and the European spice trade (late 14th century-early 15th century).”

The relevance of Bologna in the international spice trade during the Middle Ages is mostly unknown. The unpublished customs registers of the city reveal, however, that Bologna witnessed the transiting of an extraordinary flow of spices. This flow was mostly directed from the Adriatic sea to the Tyrrhenian sea in order to reach other Western European regions. At present the research is still ongoing even though some ten years of data (out of forty years in all) has already been examined. Thanks to this information it is possible to know with precision how many tons of spices passed through Bologna between 1388 and 1410. It also allows to gather information about what kind of spices were mostly traded, as well as make some hypothetical conjectures as to their role in European food consumption.

Maria Giagnacovo

“Business sources for the history of spice consumption and trade in the late Middle Ages: the Datini archive in Prato”

The Datini archive, which safeguards the correspondence and account books of a Tuscan merchant by the same name, is a very rich source for the history of economic and material life in the second half of the fourteenth century. The present paper explores the potential of the business accounts and the Datini correspondence potential as a sources to study, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, spice consumption and its trade. The documents provide a wide range of information. Household expense books (Quaderni di spese di casa) can show which spices the merchant and his extended family consumed and how often these spices were purchased. Through business letters, instead, we are able to collect information on the demand for spices and its supply in the main European market cities of the time such as London, Bruges, Genoa, Barcelona, Venice, Avignon. These same letters also provide precious information on the price of spices. Other specialized letters (valute, carichi di nave and estratti-conto) can provide information on the spice supply or availability in major European cities and in some Mediterranean trading centers while providing further information on prices as well as the trade routes used and commercialization costs incurred.

Allen Grieco

“Spices served at a rich Florentine table in the 14th century.”

The interest that cultural historians have shown in spices is well known and has contributed attributing a central role to this luxury item in signifying social distinctions. Much less attention has been paid to the material aspects of spices. For the most part we know little about exactly what spices were consumed, in what quantities and, maybe more importantly, how were these spices used in contemporary meals other than what cookbooks tells us. Many of these questions can be examined thanks to the meticulous accounts kept for the table of the Priors of Florence (the *Mensa della Signoria*). In registering all of the expenditures incurred for food and spices

they allow us to examine, in detail, the consumption of spices considered to be fitting for a particularly high end table in the second half of the 14th century. Prices, quantities, seasonal variation and how spices were associated to particular kinds of food is some of the precious information that can be inferred from this source.