

Lectures 20 and 21

Medieval and Renaissance Agriculture in Europe

The breakdown of the Roman Empire by the “barbarians” of the North resulted in the destruction of the large cities but left the rural areas and organizations relatively intact. The *villa rustica* of the Romans became the estates or demesne (domain) of medieval times, presided over by a lord who owned the land and lived in a manor house. His land worked by tenants, some free, some slave, lived in small houses that became known as the village. A feudal society developed which involved the relation between land and the people who owned and worked it. There was an exchange of service for protection under a hereditary system. The lord of the manor who owned the land (reflected in our word landlord) was served by the tenant farmers or vassals who offered homage (an acknowledgement of the situation), fealty (allegiance and faithfulness), and owed a debt of labor, usually one day per week (*the corvee*). The lord of the manor was to develop the same exchange of protection for support to his leader, eventually king, who ultimately owed his vassalage only to God. But the situation was unstable (read Macbeth). Under the breakdown of civil authority, the protection of the Lords and their warrior class (knights) became the dominant force in Europe. The tenants and slaves soon became legally bound to the estate both eventually merging into serfs, tenant farmers bound to the land. Knights were rewarded with fiefs, land awarded for military service, but as land became scarce their land was usually derived from expropriation because of warfare.

Agriculture was the principal source of wealth in Medieval Europe and so the owner of land had great power. In the typical system the land was divided by use into traditional categories such as cultivated fields for grains, pulses, and fodder; meadows for grazing cattle, sheep, and pigs; and forests which provided timber and game, usually restricted to the lords entertainment. Annexing the manors or tenant houses were kitchen gardens that provided fruit, vegetables, and herbs. Typically the unfenced “open” fields were divided into strips allocated between villagers such that each had a portion of good and poor ground. Each worked their own strips and in addition provided labor to the lord, A system of crop rotation developed with crops one year and fallow every other or every third year. The basic crops were cereals: emmer and bread wheat, barley, rye, oats, and millet. The system became very traditional with little initiative left to individuals. The system was kept stable by a system of primogeniture in which all the lands were left to the eldest son. This kept the large estates intact and left younger sons for the clergy or for adventures. The development of the church became a competing economic force as monasteries became large landholders. The priesthood however, was not hereditary due to vows of chastity of the clergy (not always adhered to), and an unstable alliance developed between the hereditary nobility and the clergy, who were often related by family ties. The increasing wealth of the clergy left them open for expropriation when their power increased to the point that they encroached on the prerogatives of the nobility. Thus, Henry VIII in his dispute with Rome over a divorce, expropriated all the monastic lands in England and divided them into his “vassals.”

As economic activity increased, with the development of towns, a money economy overtook the barter system inherent in agriculture and agricultural products became goods to be sold in towns and cities. The rise of manufacturing confronted the feudal system where wealth was based on the ownership of land. The emergence of capitalism and the increasing importance of the manufacturing sector eventually disrupted the feudal society that could no longer compete. In the upcoming struggle between the church, the nobility, and the upcoming entrepreneurs (the rift was to divide Europe into catholic and protestant princes) there was one consistent loser, the peasant class.

The long period of medieval agriculture in Europe led to our present divisions of agriculture into agronomy, horticulture, and forestry. Agronomy became involved with open fields and meadows for the production of grain and fodder for animals. The kitchen gardens of tree fruits and vine, vegetables, ornamental, herbs and medicinals became the domain of horticulture. The forests for timber and game became a special purview of forestry. Initially the differences between agronomy and horticulture were based on crops and intensity of production. This system breaks down in the tropics where it is never clear, where

agronomy ends and horticulture begins.

The development of horticultural technology is evident both in the artwork of the middle ages as artists drew everyday scenes to ornament their psalters, religious paintings, and portraits. As the price of books declined with the age of printing there was a tremendous demand for agricultural works involving agriculture and horticulture, including farm management and vine culture. Consequently, agricultural technology of the period is available from the printed record. A particularly good example is *Maison Rustique* of Charles Estienne that went through many printings starting from the late 1500s. It was translated in English as the *Country Farm* in 1600 and enlarged in 1616 and went through a series of editions (See **Reading 20-1**). These books are a tremendous source book of information about agriculture and horticulture and it is clear that by the Renaissance horticulture equals and then surpasses that described by the Roman agricultural writers. But it took over a thousand years.

The rich literature of the middle ages and renaissance, which developed in the 14th centuries, has made it possible to develop a complete history of horticulture and agronomy. It was a difficult time in Europe due to a change in climate, the little ice age, which reduced yields, the rise of disease such as the Black Plague and spread by fleas and rats, and the increase in populations which caused food costs to increase. It was at this time that the search for new routes to the East to obtain import goods of the tropics, particularly silks and spices, led to the discoveries of new lands in America and Oceania. While the conquistadors were originally after quick riches in the form of gold, they were to discover new lands and new crops which returned more than the treasure laden ships could ever haul.

Reference

Solbrig, O.T. and D.J. Solbrig. 1994. *So Shall You Reap: Farming and Crops in Human Affairs*. Island Press. Washington DC.