

Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination

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I must admit that, at the outset, the prospect of reviewing yet another book on the history of spices was not particularly alluring. In recent years there have been several such accounts, part of a succession it seems – or currently, an avalanche – of ‘food history’ books. There are reasons of course why food has all of a sudden become flavour of the month, in history, as in interdisciplinary studies. Why this is so has as much to do with long term trends and, not surprisingly, latent or deeply embedded prejudices within the discipline of history. Although it is only very recently – belatedly, that the subject of food (and as the anthropologists say, foodways) has been deemed worthy of academic interest, pioneers in the field recognized long ago that food culture merited serious research. In the first half of the 20th century, French historians Lucien Febvre and Fernand Braudel, and the *Annales* School which they founded, upheld ‘the everyday’ (including foodways) as a world worth writing about. The first volume of Braudel’s, *Civilisation and Capitalism*, entitled, ‘The Structures of Everyday Life’ (1), incorporated detailed comments on the spice trade and its global impact to show more clearly the relationship between taste and trade, people and politics, eating and economics. There’s little point here deliberating further over the sea-change that has since taken place in the last 20 or so years regarding food studies, suffice to say that now that it has arrived it also presents a set of challenges to historians that were first approached in earnest by these pioneers in the field. Food represents a field of human experience that spans the moral, physical, intellectual and emotional. The ways of life of a whole people, but more particularly, their beliefs and values, their aesthetics, and social attitudes are wondrously condensed symbolically; and, when expressed through their cuisine, the behaviour associated with dining, as sociologist Norbert Elias convincingly showed, is inextricably bound to the very form of progress we call civilization. Cooking and eating as are thus expressions of ‘who we are’ culturally as well as individually – of *mentalité*, to use Braudel’s conception – as much as of the material trappings of our lives and histories.

The geopolitical scale and economic importance of the spice trade in premodern and early modern times (up until the first half of the 18th century), the cross-cultural exchanges it spawned and the wranglings between European, Muslim, and Oriental powers are on the face of it seemingly made for good history writing. Figuratively speaking, the term 'spice' itself must have gained metaphorical power from the history of spice, having acquired as it has the connotation of excitement, intrigue, illicitness, or perhaps all three combined. Of the stories frequently told, well or badly, that of spice almost holds pride of place in histories of food. The 'story of spice' is already a good yarn: exciting, provocative and is mingled in mystery, risky business, and spurred by human passions: greed, love, desire. Questions also make for good story-telling. Why were spices so popular for so long, and then, why suddenly, by comparison, did they lose favour? Was it purely profit that lured many men to their deaths having gone in search of spice?

Professor Paul Freedman's *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* is a major work of food history that does not shirk for the task of answering these questions, but presents a timely reappraisal of the historical record in order to make its reasoned argument. It deserves to be read by all those interested in food culture, but also in trade, economics, and geography; and from disciplinary perspectives spanning postcolonialism, cultural studies and language studies. Professor Freedman explores the story of spice with cultural context in mind, as he rather untangles the thematic threads of what is a complex cultural tale. He has recently made a splash with an edited volume, *Food: the History of Taste* (2), a large format and lavishly illustrated work that has been favourably reviewed in one of the most prestigious food journals: *Gastronomica: the Journal of Food and Culture*. (3) The reviewer, Rachel Laudan, herself a food scholar of renown, commends Freedman's book as one that treats its subject with academic aplomb as well as being dynamic and exciting in its presentation. Food history *is* exciting! This is surely what in part is fuelling the interest of academics from many disciplines, some of whom it seems have waited a long time (years!) in order to express their thoughts about food and food culture, perhaps after careers largely spent writing on other subjects. We all, wittingly or otherwise, form strong opinions about food and food culture, and in the academic context, this has translated into numerous food-related books and essays. From an interdisciplinary perspective, in looking at food culture as a way of understanding humans social and political life on a grand scale, we come to understand popular or everyday culture as a dynamic canvass of events that play out in ways which shed light on the machinations and perturbations of the political and economic life of cultures and nations, and the more the study of food as a potential window onto that world makes sense. Paul Freedman's book does just this.

If ever there were a story required to justify this claim, then the tale of spice is exemplary and Freedman has excelled with his second helping of food history, unleashing his intellectual muscle with a savvy thesis on what prompted, made possible, and sustained medieval Europe's liking for spice: pepper, ginger, cloves, mace, galangal, sugar, cardamom, cinnamon, spikenard and mastic (the latter, like many others, more related to medical than to culinary use). But perhaps more crucially, to this reviewer's sensibility, the book's astuteness and sure-footedness reveals that here is a scholar whose clearly long-term interest in spices has now, to our good fortune, coalesced into simply one of the best accounts of spice yet produced. Thanks to the current scope of historical studies, including food studies, Freedman has taken the opportunity to develop his nuanced thesis about spice's history in the West and delivered a work of substantial importance.

The culinary uses of spices are of course today widely known and taken for granted. But the broader historical (social, economic, political) context of the uses, place and meaning of spice has seldom been analysed in detail; rather, it is simply, and commonly, glossed. Serious works of scholarship that have dealt with these questions *have* been produced over the years. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *Tastes of Paradise* (4) sought to explain the European penchant for spices, along with the 'intoxicants' (tea, coffee, tobacco, chocolate) that usurped them, with reference to the new demands of a shifting social psychology. This methodology, borrowing something from continental phenomenology, grounds a discussion focused on individual experience and sense of self within a changing cultural context. The work of Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (5) also comes to mind as a more recent account of spices, their history, and significance; as does Jack Turner's *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (6), a racy written, compelling and well-documented account of the discovery and exploitation of spices and of how the West's

insatiable lust for them turned into a global business. Turner's entertaining treatment of the spice story covers that period of history, which to the reader looking for a general history, would initially look most appealing. The swashbuckling winner-take-all saga of how Western powers (Portugal, Spain, Holland, and England) warred, in particular, over access to the East Indian spice islands (in present day Indonesia) needs little extra spice by way of exaggeration or embellishment. If truth is stranger than fiction, no story as little in need of adornment better supports this adage than that related to the demand for spice that gripped medieval and late-medieval Europe. So it was a pleasant surprise to discover that Paul Freedman's new book sets a new benchmark in historical food studies.

Freedman uses the detailed accounts of observers and travellers; names like Mandeville and Marco Polo come to mind, but also spreads the net much more widely, incorporating the obvious key culinary and gastronomic texts (medieval and modern), and those pertaining to health (cooking and health being so closely linked in medieval cosmology and cosmogony), as well as numerous primary sources ranging over classical and medieval texts on a range of subjects, to numerous maps. The bibliography is impressive. Initially, however, for anyone with a gastronomic interest in spices the opening of *Out of the East* reads, perhaps inevitably, as a relatively pedestrian account of spice's popularity and the reasons for this, as it details the culinary and medical uses of spices. These uses, and the humoral logic ascribed to foods and cooking, have been well described and explored elsewhere. Some of the better gastronomic histories (the work of T. Sarah Peterson, and Phyllis Bober [\(7\)](#) come to mind, and both cited by Freedman) cover this topic and importantly, have underlined the medieval cultural logic that gave spices their central role in the diet but also in the *imagination*. The latter is of course what Freedman aims to address and expose in his analysis. He clearly wants to expand on the narrow gastronomic history, albeit while incorporating the medieval humoral lore that makes the prevalent use of spice at that time comprehensible to modern minds, and satisfies, in general, any incredulity about how the apparent lavish use of spice (on contemporary standards) persisted over centuries despite the high cost of these flavourings in the medieval period. The fact was that, as luxuries, spices captivated the 'taste' of the wealthy at whatever the cost; importantly, as Freedman argues, it was what the medieval mind imagined spices to be as much as what the body dictated it wanted to consume, out of habit, or from the allure of taste. The exotic character of what Schivelbusch called 'the tastes of paradise' were indeed wondrous, magical flavours and aromas thought to arise from a Paradise on earth, as well as conveying, sensually, the tangible character of that mythical place. The question of where spices were from as much as how they could get hold of them haunted and attracted at the same time.

Freedman embarks on a thoroughly well organized exploration of the threads of this global story, emphasizing at the outset that the ancient world had already established spice routes to the east. The Romans had made the connection with India, for example. Later, the Venetians and Genoans (but also the Arabs, via Alexandria) kept control of the largely overland spice route (although the Indian Ocean was also used) that stretched of course all the way to South East Asia, the home of some the world's then most precious spices, notably, cloves and nutmeg. Arab accounts make mention of the Moluccas (a small group of islands in present day Indonesia) in 1460, long before Columbus set sail to discover 'India,' but Arab links with Java and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) were established earlier, at a time when Europe thought India to be the sole source of spice (pp. 108–9). Thus, the geo-politics and economics of how to procure spices more cheaply provides Freedman with a way to situate the provision and consumption of spice in a wider cultural context; as wide as possible in order to assess their social role in shaping the both the medieval imagination and in inspiring global voyages, risk-taking and significant investment. The links between gastronomy and health, or diet and the humoral qualities of foods (and spices), which underpin Freedman's cultural purview in the opening chapters, thus broaden to encompass how the aromas of spice in particular had firstly a spiritual significance, associated with the odour of saintliness, or of Paradise itself. Taking in, in broader measure, the role and administrative practice of, respectively, medicines and medical practitioners, Freedman convincingly concludes that 'spices were regarded in the Middle Ages as both pleasurable and healthful, as drugs and as perfumes' (p. 75). Freedman's analysis is both lucidly constructed and persuasive in its detail, building on the central idea that spices played a crucial and unique role in shaping the medieval imagination. This line of argument is part of a broader strategy that encompasses the cultural context of spice mania in the medieval world. Gradually during these early chapters, through the use of meticulously researched examples often

cited from primary manuscript sources, the premodern world of spice begins to appear as one intimately bound up with social structure, inter-cultural communications and geo-political and economic strategies on a global scale.

Expanding on the notion of a cultural continuity created through the acquisition and consumption of spices, Freedman moves from establishing the idea that spices were the material and spiritual messengers of a here and now (sensual), but also of a hereafter and an inexplicable 'otherness,' to a very much more grounding perspective in chapter four, one that approaches the actual economy and trade, including prices, of spice in the period. The Europeans' 'delight in spices ... provoked speculation about geography', Freedman states, setting up a discussion based on a detailed account of the then established global trade links. Meticulous research on prices paid by traders, merchants and consumers affords Freedman the opportunity to reflect as much on the reality, as on the imaginary, in this story of spice. Interestingly, as the trade developed through a series of middle-men, secured by stable access to Mediterranean ports (Italy, via North Africa), adulteration and fraud played a role. While prices remained reasonably steady (according to the limited records available) for the more common and relatively affordable spices, like sugar, pepper and ginger (p. 128), the price of others, like saffron, sometimes fluctuated wildly (saffron is of course labour intensive to harvest and highly perishable). Spices used for medicine like ambergris, camphor and musk could be hugely expensive. Freedman concludes that while the exoticism of spice added value, spices were bought for and sold for various purposes and priced to an extent accordingly. To reflect, as Freedman does, on the facts of what the records show, it seems that as previously conceived, the medieval 'lust' for spice has been overstated. Freedman's account is a welcome corrective.

Chapter five looks closely at the nature of rarity, one factor that added to both the cost and the allure of spices. Freedman takes pains to classify three differing types of rarity as pertaining to spice: intrinsic, circumstantial and artificial (p. 131). These relate accordingly to natural rarity of the spice, to the difficulty in acquiring it, and to the 'rarity' produced by virtue of monopoly control as was the case with the Arab control of the spice route into Europe, for example. Freedman makes the case that a 'growing understanding of the economic situation certainly represented progress over the obsessively miraculous worldview' as this pertained to the European vision of spices as magical foods of Paradise. Perhaps inevitably, the reality of an actual trade, of actual sources (no longer protected by vipers, monsters, or rivers of fire), came into view, aided initially from 1240–1360 by the Mongol empire, which allowed Europeans to travel along the routes to India, where many spices were produced, processed and shipped. Notwithstanding, rather than downplaying the fanciful in favour of the realistic, Freedman makes this crucially important interpretation:

Accurate information and better technology are important in promoting discovery, but so are excessively optimistic, unrealistic, even flat-out false anticipations. The marvellous is more important than the scientific in the initial and most risky stages of innovation. Business histories tend to emphasize technological or conceptual, 'paradigm-shifting' breakthroughs, but it is the crazes, fads, and marvels that seize the imagination, including that of investors and those who undertake physical and financial risks (p. 142).

The moral economy is dealt with in chapter six, where Freedman neatly tackles the issue of those who expressed moral indignation about the consumption of spice, which was not meant only as a pseudo-religious diatribe but as a way of deterring their purchase at such high cost. This discourse fell largely on deaf ears. Freedman turns then, in the remaining two chapters to the search for spice, filling in a lot of which many know a little (but often in a form that eschews historical fact). Particularly fascinating here is Freedman's account of the early voyages in search of spice and of the maps used (since ancient times) to represent the globe, the continents, and importantly the oceans. Based on the biblical convention according to which only one seventh of the earth was supposed to be taken up by water, pre-modern maps simply got the proportions very wrong. Freedman's research of these early maps makes for a fascinating discussion as it does for that on the early explorers. The recession of Mongol authority and the rise again of (Turkish) Islamic rule in the late 14th century, changed the geo-politics of spice supply to Europe (the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, in 1453, was a turning point), prompting renewed efforts among Europeans to gain access to the sources of spices. Here, more modern maps helped a great deal, especially in so far as they represented possible sea routes. Freedman's descriptive analysis of how better maps helped strategies of

exploration succeed deepens the question of how spices were a crucial element in early global power struggles. Ironically, it was the re-emergence of classical texts, notably Ptolemy's world map (re-discovered after the fall of Constantinople), that also aided this cause, since Ptolemy includes more navigable sea channels as an option, unlike many other extant maps at the time. The voyage of Niccolò de' Conti 'to India and east to the Indonesian islands, which lasted from 1415 to 1440' was a crucial precursor to the later, more famous voyages of De Gama and Columbus (p. 182). An updated map showing more navigable ocean, and indicating the presence of 'spice islands' by Fra Mauro of Venice, informed those undertaking subsequent explorations.

As to why, on an ideological level, the dreams to reach the spice islands were realized, Freedman suggests that the long-standing 'frustration with foreign and infidel control of the spice trade' in fact played only a minor role. By the 15th century, crusader zeal was well on the wane. The fact that 'the strongest powers in the global spice trade were Islamic was not something that bothered everyone in Europe', Freedman writes (p. 188). The discovery of the spice routes (accessed around the horn of Africa) were 'more of an opportunity than a necessity' (ibid). Freedman is careful however not to fall for technological determinism. Advances in navigation, ship's technology, and mapping cannot of themselves account for the discovery of the sea routes to the spice meccas. Freedman uses the example of Chinese exploration to make this case, tracing the story of admiral Zheng He (ca. 1371–1430) whose 'armada' of, on one occasion, 317 ships (of substantially greater size than their European counterparts), travelled to Africa and back, but whose commander, and those he represented, were not interested, as the Europeans were, in capturing the spice market. This 'decision to cede control of the spice trade to other players on the part of the Chinese reflected a cultural attitude ...' (p. 190).

After a wide-ranging discussion that moves far outside the tangible, corporeal experience of spice consumption and use (as a medicine or perfume), Freedman returns in his conclusion to the various themes addressed throughout the book. It is a summing up in brief but also, I suggest, a re-grounding in that imaginative realm that provided the impetus for the spice phenomenon and for his book. Freedman thereby underlines that while economics, geo-politics, religion, and technology played roles, without the imaginative conception of spices – their powers, prestige, and preciousness – in the minds of Europeans, the voyages of discovery would have needed alternative inspiration. In some sense, after an enjoyable encounter with this book, it has also brought me back to the original problem. In this instance, the facts have been lucidly related, the fanciful kept at bay, and to the merit of Paul Freedman, the reasoning is refreshing, compelling and convincing. What still requires work is the question of the degree to which spices were physiologically and psychologically a part of medieval European life (and of life elsewhere); of how the life of the individual, the representational power of spices, and the ways these tastes transformed everyday life experience; of how the experience of life was understood in terms of taste, smell, and the other senses. The sensorium too is subject to changes in 'taste'. Such studies undertaken with recourse to sensory and cultural data of the most detailed kind is possible, if difficult. Interdisciplinarity helps us see the same data differently and so there is always room to develop this multi-faceted approaches to historical subjects. Spices present a particularly rich vein of potential research. In fairness, these questions seem to fall outside the scope of Freedman's book, a welcome addition to a new type of food history, presenting as it does a cogent, well-informed and highly enjoyed thesis. It lacks at all a little spice, perhaps it is that the individual tasters of spice take a back seat fairly early on (in the chapters on gastronomy and medicine), and that the story soon becomes one writ on a much larger stage. Lost in this albeit lively, readable account are some of the *experiences* related to consuming spice that would have rooted it more in the everyday. Yet I read with great interest and appreciation and recommend this book without reservation.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

Notes

1. Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century. Vol. 1. The Structures of Everyday Life* (English ed., London, 1985). [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Paul Freedman, *Food: the History of Taste* (Berkeley, CA, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Rachel Laudan, 'Review: "Food: the History of Taste"', *Gastronomica*, 9, 2 (2009), 101–2.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise* (New York, NY, 1992).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Andrew Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (London, 2005).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cooking* (Ithaca, NY, 1994);
Phyllis Bober, *Art, Culture and Cuisine: Ancient and Medieval Gastronomy* (Chicago, IL, 1999).[Back to \(7\)](#)

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