REVIEWS

A GREEN REVOLUTION?


In 1974 Andrew Watson first proposed an ‘agricultural revolution’ in the early Islamic world: he has recently returned to the theme (‘A medieval green revolution’, The Islamic Middle East, ed. A. Udovitch, Princeton, 1981). In this book Watson opens with the premiss that ‘the range of useful plants available to the cultivator… was greatly increased in the early centuries of Islam by the diffusion of new plants and the development of new cultivars’. Few, given the defective and predominantly anecdotal nature of the sources, would try to refute this proposition. Fewer still would attempt to prove it. This Watson seeks to do by means of short studies of the origins, pre-Islamic and Islamic diffusion of eighteen plants. His selection is peculiar: the banana, coconut, mango and shaddock, for example, had no general economic significance in the area and period of this study and their inclusion detracts from the importance of cotton, durum wheat, rice, sorghum and sugar cane. Still more odd is Watson’s failure to adduce conclusive evidence in support of his premiss for most of the plants examined. He repeatedly reaches tentative conclusions – ‘…almost certainly the work of the Arabs…’, ‘In all probability… developed in the Islamic world and diffused through it…’ – which are no improvement upon the status quo. While the defects of the evidence are not Watson’s fault, he should not show such impatience with the inadequacy of his sources: it simply will not do, for example, to claim plants for twelfth-century ‘Norman Sicily’ when the documents cited are as late as March 1439 (p. 178, n. 7) or June 1487 (p. 169, n. 32).

In the second half of his book, Watson seeks ‘to identify the features of the early Islamic world which eased the new crops along their way and the ways in which this world was in turn affected by these introductions’. Here Watson is still hampered by the defects of the evidence (see, for example, ch. 17, ‘The agents of diffusion’), but this does not fully account for his failure to convince. Often, where good evidence is available, Watson fails to make use of it. We hear nothing, for example, of the decline of classical agriculture, and it is surprising that a book largely concerned with early medieval Mediterranean agriculture does not even mention geomorphological change or discuss the problematic ‘Younger Fill’. Again, the account of the routes of diffusion in the Indian Ocean and ‘Nabatean Lane’ in Sassanian and early Islamic times would have benefited from discussion of the archaeological evidence from Siraf. Elsewhere, Watson’s treatment of a particular area or period reveals plain shoddy workmanship. Norman Sicily (pp. 82–3 and note 27) is a case in point. King Roger’s regnal dates are not 1105–30. The flight of Muslims from Palermo occurred not ‘during the reign of William II’ but was occasioned by his death. Norman and French peasants were never settled in Sicily. ‘The new land use’ attributed by Watson to the Normans is identical to that described by Ibn Hawqal in the 970s. ‘Muslim crops’ and other features of the ‘new agriculture’ were not discarded by the Normans but – except for a hiccup under Frederick II which reflects the immediate effects of the Muslim rebellion of 1189–1246 – were continued well into early modern times.

The bulk of Watson’s book concentrates upon the Mediterranean and the Near
East and has little to say of sub-Saharan Africa. An account is given of the transmission of wild plants to India along the ‘Nabatean Lane’ in the second and first millennia B.C., and the reception from India of ‘ennobled’ varieties during the first Islamic centuries. Brief mention is also made of a possible direct route linking India or South-East Asia and Madagascar, along which some crops may have spread. Several were carried, perhaps by the Arabs, from East to West Africa: here the sub-Saharan route is said to have been of less importance than were the trans-Saharan caravans. For most crops, Watson thinks diffusion in Africa was difficult and slow. He attributes this less to physical than to socio-economic obstacles which had to be overcome. Thus the diffusion of cotton, for example, was intimately connected with the spread of Islam, which taught that the faithful should be clothed.

The hypothesis of an ‘Abbāsid agricultural revolution is challenging and may well prove useful. It will certainly stimulate debate as present and future archaeological and palaeobotanical research yields new evidence. The principal failings of Professor Watson’s book are two: first, that he attempts to impose a general interpretation of complex phenomena experienced over three centuries throughout the Islamic world, without countenancing any but the most trivial exceptions to his rule; and second, that in so doing he makes too many minor slips and larger errors which inevitably detract from the credibility of his argument. At times his enthusiasm is sympathetic (I particularly enjoyed: ‘The Islamic conquests were followed by a far-reaching diffusion of banana culture!’) but nowhere does it replace sound technique and sober judgement.

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CAPTIVES OF THE CORSAIRS

Spanish Captives in North Africa in the Early Modern Age. By ELLEN G. FRIEDMAN.

This is a study dedicated to piracy and Barbary corsair warfare which covers the period from the last quarter of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth. It examines the effect that this prolonged state of undeclared warfare had on Spanish society. The corsair states of North Africa threatened the peninsula along all its coast in a virtual siege, perpetuating for more than two hundred years the ancient confrontation between Iberian Christianity and Islam; the book centres on the consequences of this conflict as part of the Spanish life of the era, on the importance of its psychological effect as well as on its economic implications. For this, the author not only makes use of the literature of the period studied, as much fiction as polemical religious and propaganda works spread by the Orders of Redemption in their campaigns to raise funds, and one in which captivity is a recurrent theme, but also and mainly of unpublished material from archives. Special mention should be made of the documents from the archives of the Trinitarian and Mercedarian Orders (to a large extent not even catalogued and difficult of access) which offer a most significant contribution to the work under review.

This begins with an introduction and analysis of the historical context in which the author outlines the bases of conflict, and is divided into three parts. The first is dedicated to the captives and their captors: number, places and circumstances in which they were captured, social and professional background, geographical zones most harassed by the corsairs as well as places where the corsairs had their base and where the captives were taken. The author makes abundant use (in this