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Paul S. Kinderstedt. *Cheese and Culture: A History of Cheese and Its Place in Western Civilization*

White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman

What began as a book that would be a resource for new artisan cheese makers turned into a book that tracks the history of western civilization, a history in which cheese plays a larger role than one would have ever guessed. Kinderstedt's research turned into an undergraduate course at the University of Vermont (a big cheese state) that would integrate cheese science and technology. Cheese has been an enormous part of our civilizations from Neolithic times to today.

I read this book because I am an artisan cheese lover, and have even made a pilgrimage to Parma, Italy, where Parmigiano Reggiano, called "the king of cheeses," has been produced for the past 1,000 years. This book made that journey even more significant for me.

Although almost all cultures have some sort of simple cheeses, such as the yogurt cheeses that the Mongols developed out of mares' milk, it is only in the West that the great technology of cheeses developed, a process begun in earliest human civilization after the domestication of ruminant animals.

Milk quickly spoils but cheese, a food transformed by technology, can keep, making it a value-added product. The history of this process began some 9,000 years ago in Southwest Asia, a region in which cattle, sheep, and goats had been domesticated. All of these animals provided a variety of useful products, particularly sheep and goats providing wool. But all of them in breeding seasons did have surplus milk, which our ancestors wanted to use around the year.

Beginning about 17,000 years ago, the post-glacial global warming began to establish what has come to be known as Mediterranean climate, hot dry summers and cool wet winters. Wild cereals such as wheat, rye, and barley, along with legumes such as beans, peas, and lentils, began to thrive. The extensive stands of wild cereals extended in an elongated swath from the Jordan River Valley northward through inland Syria and to what is now southeastern Turkey. This became, with the advent of hunter-gatherers, "the fertile crescent," mother of civilization for much of the Old World.

Between 11,000 and 9,500 BC, the earth had one last cycle of extreme cooling which wiped out these early settlements. But around 9,500 BC, there was a sudden intense episode of global warming, increasing the average annual temperature by as much as 13 degrees Fahrenheit over just a couple of generations. This was followed by slow but

steady warming for the next two millennia, resulting in a global climate that we still have today.

As humans in the Fertile Crescent developed food crops, they found that such crops attracted sheep and goats, especially near mountains such as the Taurus Mountains of southwest Anatolia and the Zagros Mountains of western Iran. The farmers found an opportunity to begin herding these animals, taking them from the lowlands in the winter to the mountains in the summer, a pattern that still exists in the migrations of Iranian tribal peoples.

Mixed farming and rapid population growth brought profound cultural change: the blossoming of the Neolithic (New Stone Age) period. Architecture bloomed, as did a new widespread appearance of religious symbols and shrine building. Humans then had moved beyond the status of a slightly revised and more efficient version of the eating and breeding machines that had preceded them. To use biblical language, says the author, humans were made in the image of God.

The archeological record tells us that until 7,000 BC, animals were raised for meat. It took generations of careful breeding and handling until sheep and goats were developed to have more milk than just needed for their young, and for these animals to permit humans to milk them. At the same time, intensive grain cultivation and population explosion produced widespread environmental degradation and erosion. Pastoralism and milk production were probably a response to this disaster.

Adult humans in Neolithic times were almost universally lactose intolerant (as many Asians are today). But they found that cheese, a product made by boiling milk, made this foodstuff digestible. The invention of pottery enabled milk to be stored, transported, and cooked. Ceramic pots with drain holes were the first sieves for draining the whey from curds formed either by heat or by adding a small amount of rennet (from the intestines of animals). The entire agricultural and herding revolution was characterized by the ability to store food, a need that cheese met.

According to Kinderstedt, cheese and religion have a long relationship. There are many references in the Bible to cheese being a gift for the deity (or in polytheist societies, gods). Several chapters are devoted to all of the inventions that emerged in primeval times that had something to do with farming--ceramics, metallurgy, animal husbandry, and cheese-making-- and the uses of these products in trade and religion (temple gifts).

Kinderstedt traces cheese development across the world from the Fertile Crescent across to India. China, however, never developed a culture of cheese making.

The Mediterranean world was early in developing cheese and the various technologies that produce varieties, some of which we know today: feta and ricotta, and somewhat

later, the dry grating cheese such as Pecorino. But it was in northern Europe that the amazing cheese culture that we know today had its origins. The north was more hospitable to raising cattle, the most favored herding animal of the Indo-European peoples. Of these, the Celts were the specialists among cheese makers, and their descendants, the French and north Italians, still are.

Very interesting chapters involve cheese in the Greek religions, with a good deal on the diet of the earlier (and hardier) Athenians (cheese, barley cake, ripe olives and leeks). There is much interesting material on the very elegant cheeses developed by the Romans which were important trade and luxury goods as well as a culinary boost to their diets.

Italians, beginning with the Etruscans, were always enthusiastic cheese makers. The Italian genius showed itself in the connection of cheese making and pigs, an important source of meat that can be smoked and preserved in other ways. The pigs would consume the whey extruded during cheese making, a symbiotic development still used. Parma is not only the source of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, but the equally famous Parma hams (prosciutto). These foodstuffs have been raised together for millennia.

With the advent of Christianity throughout the late Roman world, systematic cheese making became the norm. The chapters on the manor, monastery, and age of cheese diversification are fascinating. Monasteries in France have always been known for their splendid cheese making. I visited one monastery in the Auvergne region of France that sold in its gift stores the most marvelous brie-type cheese and all sorts of honey confections. The ethic of work promoted by the monastic movement produced such wonders.

Over time, peasant cheese makers in northwestern France fine-tuned their simple practices and storage conditions in ways that rendered them predictable and desirable. This was a process that continues to this very day in the production of European and now American artisan cheeses.

The author covers the extensive cheese making in England and the Netherlands, and introduces the development of factory-produced cheese which began to replace artisan farm cheese. The industrialization movement came at the same time as other practices that replaced female practitioners. Medicine went through such a transformation too, eliminating the midwife practitioners and replacing them with male doctors and hospitals.

The one good element that emerged with the industrialization of cheese making was that, for the first time, standardized instructions (recipes) for specific cheese varieties could be reproduced anywhere. Dairy schools were created during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

However, both the transfer of cheese making to male industrialists and midwifery to medical doctors produced unanticipated consequences: terrible cheese and high maternal death rates. Both female practices have had a revival today, to the benefit of both cheeses and maternal outcomes.

The author may have been focused on the evolution of cheese, but its connection with other aspects of history figures substantially in this book. The section on Holland's role as cheese provisioner of all Europe was fascinating. Their cheeses, which were solid, round, and encased in wax, traveled well and brought in much revenue.

But more interesting than the cheese was the very fact of the identity of a country that would never have come into being without great human intervention. During the Middle Ages, much of Holland was uninhabited or sparsely populated, a wasteland consisting of waterlogged peat bogs and maritime salt pastures. It wasn't until the fifteenth century, writes Kinderstedt, that commercial dairying began to emerge in Holland as a significant element of the economy. Despite the unpromising and sodden terrain, cheese making figured from the late Neolithic in this area because one could not grow much food in the salt marshes, but in the ridges formed by oceanic activity on the coast, the people could raise cattle and survive on dairying.

The miracle of Holland began from the tenth century onward, when the Dutch undertook massive land reclamation. They laboriously drained the fields with drainage ditches, built low dikes, all despite having a chronic labor shortage (this was the period of recurring cycles of Black Death). The aristocrats and churchmen recruited the necessary labor force by offering serfs their freedom and almost absolute, exclusive property rights to the land that they reclaimed in return for their labor. (The labor shortages in other parts of Europe were treated in much the same way, changing the social pecking order for the better.)

But in Holland, there were unexpected consequences. The reclaimed lands were not good for grain raising. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the production of bread cereals collapsed, brought on by an ecological crisis of largely human making.

Draining the peat bogs produced the sinking of landmass, opening the country to devastating oceanic flooding, made worse by a gradually rising sea level. They were losing their country. However, in an amazing example of human determination and ingenuity, says Kinderstedt, many Dutch peasants chose to adapt their agriculture and fight the North Sea. They developed the polder system, enclosing their fields with dikes and pumping out surface water to create permanent dry lands. In 1408, the windmill, once used for grinding grain, was adapted to pump water from a polder.

The soil still was not good enough for wheat, but it was fine for barley and hops, and gave rise to artisan beer brewing. Other farmers dropped grain cultivation for dairy cattle. The Dutch created a lucrative trade (in exchange for wheat that they imported) in their hearty

artisan cheeses and beers. In addition, the rise of Calvinism in Holland further encouraged the entrepreneurial spirit that was already part of their culture.

Between 1500 and 1700, Holland's economy expanded, probably more rapidly than any other in Europe. Kinderstedt shows the interrelationships of trade, religion, ethnic temperament, and the growth of the nation state. Holland has been an amazing case study of what determined human beings can do.

The rest of the book tracks the modern evolution of cheese making, beginning with factories and systematic production, but then going on to today's wonderful artisanal cheeses and the governmental rules for keeping them pure and safe. Who would have thought that cheese could be such an important part of human history?