Fall 2010

Book Review: Tilling the Hateful Earth: Agricultural Production and Trade in the Late Antique East by Michael Decker

David B. Hollander

Iowa State University, dbh8@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons, Cultural History Commons, Medieval History Commons, and the Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/109. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Book Review: Tilling the Hateful Earth: Agricultural Production and Trade in the Late Antique East by Michael Decker

Abstract
Michael Decker's monograph examines late antique agriculture in the Roman diocese of Oriens, an administrative unit stretching along the Mediterranean coast from the Sinai Peninsula to southern Anatolia, extending to Mesopotamia in the East and embracing Cyprus to the West. Although mainly concerned with the period between 300 and 700 CE, the book has plenty to offer those interested in earlier periods of classical antiquity.

Disciplines
Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Cultural History | Medieval History | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures

Comments

This book review is available at Iowa State University Digital Repository: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_pubs/109
Review
Reviewed Work(s): Tilling the Hateful Earth: Agricultural Production and Trade in the Late Antique East by Michael Decker
Review by: David B. Hollander
Source: Agricultural History, Vol. 84, No. 4 (FALL 2010), pp. 544-545
Published by: Agricultural History Society
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/27869022
Accessed: 29-11-2018 20:30 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Agricultural History Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Agricultural History
already easily available in recent paperback editions of the collections in which they first appeared. For specialists already familiar with Campbell’s work, the book’s most valuable feature is perhaps the new introduction, an engaging reflection on the current state of research in medieval rural history. However, to obtain it one does not need to buy the book. The introduction is, at the time of writing at least, available as a free download from the publisher’s website.

Chris Briggs
University of Southampton


Michael Decker’s monograph examines late antique agriculture in the Roman diocese of Oriens, an administrative unit stretching along the Mediterranean coast from the Sinai Peninsula to southern Anatolia, extending to Mesopotamia in the East and embracing Cyprus to the West. Although mainly concerned with the period between 300 and 700 CE, the book has plenty to offer those interested in earlier periods of classical antiquity.

The first two chapters provide an overview of the geography, climate, and socio-economic landscape of Oriens. Most of the region supported dry-farming but the use of irrigation grew steadily during this period as population growth forced intensification and the exploitation of previously uncultivated marginal land. The state was the largest landowner followed by the church and its monasteries. Decker provides a deft survey of the villages, farmsteads, and estates that dotted the countryside. Slaves were relatively unimportant in agriculture with large landowners relying predominantly on tenants and the part-time labor of small-scale farmers. Decker next turns to the region’s most important crops: grain, vines, and olive trees. Chapter 3 discusses the tools and methods of grain cultivation and provides an excellent rundown of the various cereals grown. Here as elsewhere the author is careful to consider the practices of small-scale farmers as well as the elite whose agricultural writings survive, and he makes plausible suggestions about the diffusion of agricultural knowledge. Chapter 4, on viticulture, describes the process of cultivation, the various vine cultivars, as well as the additives used in making wine (e.g., gypsum and sea water). As major Byzantine cities and even the Merovingians sought out its wine, “the eastern provinces increasingly became the vineyard of the Mediterranean” (122). This allowed wine to serve as “a marketable commodity from which one could render a profit even from a small plot of land” (148). Chapter 5 provides a similar examination of olive cultivation, which could also be quite profitable. Decker argues that “late antique farmers seem to

544
have added a few new methods of planting and grafting” and observes “a strong tendency to improve strains and develop new varieties through experimentation” (173). The final three chapters examine the economics of agriculture. Chapter 6 focuses on the development and use of irrigation technology while Chapter 7 looks at the risks and rewards of various strategies such as ley-farming and reliance on cash crops. Chapter 8 turns to the problems of marketing and trade. Here Decker makes a strong case for the importance of the overland transport of agricultural commodities, arguing convincingly that such traffic “was neither expensive nor rare” (257).

Overall, this well-researched, clearly written, and amply illustrated book argues that, despite some setbacks (e.g., the Justinianic plague of the sixth century), late antique Oriens was not “a dilapidated group of impoverished... provinces” ripe for conquest but instead enjoyed a vibrant economy fueled by a host of developments in agriculture (27). Pointing out that several developments attributed to the Islamic Agricultural Revolution, such as the saqiya, really came earlier, Decker suggests that “rather than viewing the upward trajectory of intensive agriculture in the Islamic world as a decisive break with the past, it is best viewed as continuing long-standing ancient development and adaptation” (227).

David B. Hollander
Iowa State University


This book contains themes of interest to readers of Agricultural History—the activities of the landed classes; agricultural improvement and environmental influences; the breeding, training, and management of animals; and rural pursuits—but its perspective is a cultural one. Thus, Landry dismisses Robert Bakewell’s experiments with the observation that gentlemen had long engaged in selective breeding, specifically to produce fleet-footed race-winners, strong, pacey hunters, and showy coach-horses. According to Landry, the assimilation of Ottoman-bred horses, together with their distinctive approach to horsemanship, was the vital catalyst.

Naturally, Landry discusses the emergence of the English thoroughbred, emphasizing the significance of the infusion of oriental blood, while recognizing the importance of native stock in its genetic make-up. In England, “naturalized” eastern horses grew in size and substance as a result of feeding on the improved grasses and cereals of the agricultural revolution. The nobility and aura of intelligence emanating from eastern horses also provides an example of animal agency at work: as they appeared to obey their rider by

545