

Beer in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. By Richard W. Unger. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. xvi + 319 pp. Illustrations, tables, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-8122-3795-1.

Reviewed by Richard Wilson

In the discerning preface to his book, Richard W. Unger ponders the problems of writing a history of beer in Europe in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. To most people, writing the history of beer in any period is not a serious task. But for those few historians who do, the undertaking is indeed a formidable one, especially since the industry was all pervasive in the lives of the people of northern Europe during the long period surveyed here. Notwithstanding his reservations, Unger brings to his charge a formidable scholarship, which belies all those jibes about the seriousness of beer as a fit subject for academic study.

He has already published extensively on the Dutch brewing industry (*A History of Brewing in Holland, 900–1900*, 2001) and, earlier, the Dutch ship-building industry (*Dutch Ship Building before 1800*, 1978). His skills of precise analysis and quantification, honed in these books, are now applied to the wider canvas of beer brewing in northern Europe. In thirteen chapters and an epilogue he surveys the industry from its earliest origins in the Middle East, through the production of mead and ale, with their additives of honey and a battery of herbs, to the gradual triumph of hopped beer across the whole of northern Europe from the thirteenth century onward. Critical features in the development of the industry were the rise of commercial brewing consequent upon growing urbanization, the tendency of cities to regulate and tax production, and the superiority of hopped beer, which allowed it to be kept longer and, if brewed strong enough, to travel.

The two centuries after around 1450 were a golden age for brewing in Europe. The brewing of hopped beer, first perfected in Hamburg and the Hanse towns, spread throughout northern Europe before gaining a hold in Holland. It was then taken up in the southern Low Countries in the late fifteenth century, and was finally adopted in England, eastern Europe, and Scandinavia from around 1550. In

Holland, where commercial brewing grew very rapidly after the 1390s, the industry came second only to textiles in importance to the country's economy. Yet, however significant the industry became, and despite its relatively large capital inputs and the brewers' increasing prominence among urban elites, the scale of individual commercial breweries, even in the larger cities, was small. The biggest employed only a dozen workers; more usually the number was three or four. Moreover, work was sporadic across the year. Only in London, and then not until 1650, did the largest breweries employ a score or more of men. Generally, the export trade was surprisingly lively, even if it formed only a small percentage of total output, which, in the late medieval period, was perhaps around one-tenth of production now. But consumption, at least in the most prosperous towns, was formidable. In Belgium in the mid-1990s consumption per person was 102 liters per annum; in the late medieval period it was twice that amount. At Stockholm Castle in 1577 the nobility was provided with a daily allowance of 5.2 liters, which would, if consumed, have provided an intake of between 2,080 and 4,160 calories. Little wonder those toppers represented in Dutch art possess such ample girths!

A brisk epilogue maintains that this golden age ended around 1650. For a century and a half, the competition from spirits, tea, coffee, and cocoa seriously eroded the fortunes of brewers in Holland and the north German cities. Those in England, Bavaria, and Leuven fared rather better. And women, prominent before 1500 in the production and sale of beer, also became increasingly sidelined.

Much of Unger's primary evidence comes from the Low Countries, but he makes every attempt, by integrating recent writings on beer in Germany, England, France, and Scandinavia, to provide a survey of general trends. At times, for instance, when he traces the growth of regulation and taxation, his approach does not make for easy reading. Statistic and example are piled upon statistic and example, from Hamburg and the north German towns, through the Low Countries, and then on to Paris, London, Norwich, Oxford, and Aberdeen. With such diverse observations, generalization is an elusive task. Certainly, the sources, although relatively good for the industry, are not always suitable, in that they are so often derived from tax and regulatory functions. Sometimes they seem improbable. Were as many as 700

out of 1,200 houses in Einbeck at the beginning of the seventeenth century breweries and brew-houses? The dust jacket proclaims that the book “[weaves] together the stories of prosperous businessmen, skilled brew-masters, and small producers.” This is misleading, as almost no “stories” survive to enliven the text about either the lives of individual brewers or the workings of a single brewery. Inevitably, the account is drawn from the more austere records of taxation and regulation. Again, this leads to difficulties. We, as a consequence, know little about brewing outside the jurisdiction of towns, except for the occasional monastery or great estate. Yet, since beer was so central to the culture, diets, and celebrations of people in the countryside, it was as important in rural surroundings, whether brewed at home or in the local alehouse, as in the towns themselves.

It would be quite wrong to conclude by dwelling on the problems of writing the history of the brewing industry across northern Europe over the course of 700 or 800 years. Unger muses at the outset that a more sensible historian would have chosen to concentrate upon a single town or region. Students of medieval history are greatly in debt to his academic folly, for he has written a fine account of brewing across a long and difficult period.

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