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Blé, vigne, olivier : transformations des pratiques et des représentations d'une triade méditerranéenne

Wheat, vines, and olive trees: transformations in the practice and representations of a Mediterranean triad

Forward

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Forward

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OUTLINE

Dynamics of land ownership and management
Transformation and circulation of agricultural practices and their representations

TEXT

- 1 In this second issue of *Mutations en Méditerranée*, we turn our attention to land, and more specifically to agricultural areas and their products. Observing the land and its products means analysing the different practices of rural societies insofar as they bear witness to the transformations of a time and a place. In the Mediterranean, the iconic wheat, vines and olives crops have historically shaped our representations of the region. These products, which together make up the Mediterranean triad, are not only agricultural products, but serve also cultural and identity markers. In a retrospective movement of the invention of tradition (Hobsbawm 1983), the Mediterranean was imagined as a “civilisation of wheat” (Braudel 1979), “of the olive tree” (Verdié 1990) or “of the olive tree and cereals” (Chazan-Gillig 1993), as evidenced by the many allegorical representations drawing on the symbols of a nourishing and fertile land.
- 2 For this new issue, we have chosen to examine the Mediterranean rural space through the lens of this triad and its transformations, to challenge a single, unchanging representation of Mediterranean space. Despite sharing ‘the same granaries, the same wine cellars, the same oil mills’ (Braudel 1966, p. 229), this region of the world has always been a crossroads for global agricultural trade and circulation. Wheat, vines and olives, the emblematic foods of a Mediterranean diet that has recently been given heritage status (UNESCO 2013), have all been shaped by the global and local dynamics that run through the region. As Reguant-Aleix (2012) points out, this diet is “[...] in perpetual motion, presenting a large number of possible reading

scales and which, for millennia and from the landscape to the table, has been shaping and evolving” (p. 40). The dialectical relationship between the practices and representations of this triad has evolved as a result of the climatic, demographic, political and technical upheavals that continue to transform this space. As cultural and landscape markers imbued with significant symbolic value (Fumey 2007), the products of this triad are also used, for example, by public and private tourism operators (Angles 2023; Souissi 2023).

- 3 This issue explores representations and shared collective imaginaries to understand the shifting and heterogeneous bonds between territories and societies. The five articles in this issue address these issues at different spatial and temporal levels. They reveal the changes taking place in Mediterranean societies, to which wheat, vines and olives bear witness, and invite us to look beyond their nutritional value. From the diversity of their cultivation, which reveals land management and appropriation issues, to the circulation and economic and social usefulness of the products, not to mention the symbolic dimensions they reflect, wheat, vines and olive trees are relevant entry points to examine the mutations of the Mediterranean.

Dynamics of land ownership and management

- 4 The authors question the issues of land ownership and administration (Le Roy 2011; Gueringuer *et al.* 2017). Whether they are recent or long-standing, these issues influence and reshape the uses and conflicts in agricultural areas, revealing relations of production and social mobility.
- 5 The Mediterranean triad is used in agriculture for its economic, productive and nutritional value. In an article focusing on the de Foresta family at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Camille Caparos examines the roots of prosperity in the farming of estates in Marseilles, which provided cereals, olive branches and wine for sale in the city. A few centuries earlier, Derek Benson shows how the abbey of Fontfroide in the south of France enjoyed an economic boom thanks to rents on oil, wine and cereals produced by farmers in Narbonne. In addition to the importance of having bread and wine on

tables and altars, aristocrats were also interested in growing olives and cereals. The products of vineyards and olive groves were primarily intended for sale, and were rarely consumed by the peasants themselves. In towns, the question of feed was all the more crucial as poor supplies led to major political tensions, as was the case in medieval Tuscany studied by Felipe Mendes Erra: wheat production and distribution networks, which were at the heart of the frumentary revolts, became subjects of political administration and fuelled the analytical categories of their contemporary commentators. Wheat, vines and olive trees, far from being mere agricultural products, carried significant political and social values in the studied Mediterranean areas.

- 6 The appropriation and management of agricultural land is illustrated in each article as a means of social ascent and consolidating political power. Derek Benson looks at the land in Narbonne in the twelfth century, where wine-growing existed alongside the cultivation of olives and grain, and describes the seigneurial methods used by the monks of Fontfroide Abbey to consolidate their political and temporal power. In addition to acquiring income by collecting rents and annuities, the appropriation and extension of these farmlands enabled them to legitimise their political authority over peasants and certain lords. The economic flourishing of Fontfroide enabled them to assert themselves against the neighbouring priory, aligned with the Viscounts of Narbonne. In the medieval Tuscany studied by Felipe Mendes Erra, wheat supply itself was the keystone of social and political order, fueling ethical disputes and interpretations of collective action in the public sphere. A few centuries later, the interest of the French nobles of the Ancien Régime in farmland was as tenacious as ever. Camille Caparos' study of the archives of the noble de Foresta family shows how the management of agricultural estates by the de Foresta wife enabled a woman to assert her existence within her family and social group. Her involvement in the management of her estates testifies to their importance in gaining social legitimacy in an environment dominated by men.
- 7 Studying agricultural production also means observing power relationships, both between social groups and in the differentiated uses of land: thus, the appropriation of land or of its management implies the dispossession of someone else. Derek Benson analyses the

seigniorial coercion exerted by the Abbey of Fontfroide on the peasants ploughing its land, based on a complex system of rent collection. The monastery maintained itself thanks to its network of barns, whether acquired or inherited, contrary to the Cistercian ideal of self-sufficiency. However, Derek Benson points out that these peasants were not deprived of any agency in the shadow of the abbey, as in the case of Pons Baron le Vieux, who refused to sell part of his land to the abbey in 1187. When her husband died at the height of the revolution, Claire Julie de Foresta, studied by Camille Caparos, took full charge of the administration of the land: her appropriation of the estate was achieved in particular by taking charge of the written word, which made her the true administrator. As Felipe Mendes Erra shows, appropriating production or the fruits of agriculture also involved discourse. In Florence, for example, a chancellor and a wheat merchant did not convey the same images of the behaviour and emotions of the Florentines during episodes of famine: the political responsibility for the revolts would therefore change according to the chronicler.

- 8 Thus it is not only relationships and uses that are studied in this issue, but also social practices that take on an economic and political dimension and contribute to changes in representations.

Transformation and circulation of agricultural practices and their representations

- 9 The cultural significance of the Mediterranean triad is both enduring and deeply rooted in religious traditions. In the ancient Mediterranean, the olive tree was a mythical landmark (Amouretti and Comet 1992), while cereals, wine and oil were essential supports for Mediterranean polytheisms and then monotheisms (Brun 2003), as can be seen from the Attic 'red figure' cups that place the vine at the centre of the representation of the Dionysian cult (Colonna 2011), or the cults dedicated to Ceres, goddess of agriculture, harvests and fertility.

- 10 While this triad remains emblematic of our contemporary societies, the place of agricultural crops and their role in the organisation of Mediterranean territories is undergoing a metamorphosis in the face of modern dynamics. These transformations are analysed in depth in this issue. The authors use wine as an object of study to understand the contemporary changes in Mediterranean wine-growing areas, both materially - through technical innovations and labelling schemes - and symbolically - in terms of the representations of a specific wine-growing identity. Throughout history, wine has always been more than a mere commodity; it embodies a rich cultural heritage deeply rooted in Mediterranean agricultural traditions (Casanova 2003). As the contributions by Lilian Estradé and Caroline Laurent-Varin Emin show, agricultural practices and representations of these wine-growing areas were marked by economic, social and cultural transformations over the course of the twentieth century.
- 11 The shifts in wine production practices, as studied in the vineyards of the Midi by these two authors, bear witness to the way in which the construction of a regional winegrowing identity has been shaped by the interventions of public institutions. These regulations, ranging from clonal selection to the labelling of terroirs, play a crucial role in defining and typifying regional wines. Using a historical approach, Lilian Estradé explores the evolution of wine-growing practices in the Languedoc, focusing on the scientific and technical innovations linked to the selection and multiplication of vine plants from the 1960s onwards. The author highlights how shifts in knowledge transfer between research and the industry, especially via nurseries, contributed to the 'restructuring of vineyards' in the Midi. This 'public authority-orchestrated model' allowed for the "individualization of wines from the South [...] within an increasingly liberal and competitive market" (Estradé, p. 12).
- 12 By analysing a series of institutional maps, promotional maps and advertising visuals, Caroline Laurent-Varin Emin gives an account of the constitution and development of the Côtes du Rhône geographical wine region during the 20th century. From a geohistorical perspective, she traces the development of winegrowing cartography, in particular the processes of labelling by the *Institut National de l'Origine et de la Qualité* (INAO), and the way in which maps have shaped territorial and economic representations of the Côtes-du-

Rhône. These maps constitute ‘ideal and material representations’ that have contributed to the ‘construction of a winegrowing territoriality’ around the ‘Côtes-du-Rhône identity’ (Laurent-Vermin, p. 1-3). Both contributions show the predominant role played by public institutions in the construction of a ‘regional typicity’, a process which, as the authors show, is not without consequence, as it can give rise to tensions between the forces of modernisation imposed by institutional regulations and the values of tradition rooted locally.

13 Both contributions demonstrate the complex interplay between tradition and innovation. The transformations observed in these wine-growing areas are not just a reflection of technical choices but are also part of a quest for ‘southern typicity’ (Estradé, p. 8) and recognition that operates on both local and international levels. In his article, Lilian Estradé shows how the technical innovations of massal selection (selection of the highest quality vines for reproduction) and clonal selection (reproduction by cloning of vines with specific characteristics) introduced in the Languedoc vineyards in the 1960s and 1970s, with the aim of improving the health quality of the vines, gave rise to resistance among winegrowers attached to their traditional practices. They had to adapt their practices in a context of technical innovation that seemed to ‘limit [their] agency’ in favour of public and intermediary players such as vine nurseries (Estradé, p. 10). Caroline Laurent-Varin Emin shows how the construction of a viticultural territoriality for the vineyards of the Côtes-du-Rhône appellation was polarised around the southern vineyards of this region, thus contributing to a potential ‘invisibilisation of the other Mediterranean vineyards’ in favour of those of the southern Rhône (Laurent-Varin, p. 14). The challenges of modernisation, labelling and the search for a common identity for winegrowing terroirs highlight the tension between preserving traditions and adapting to market changes. This duality provides fertile ground to explore how winegrowing practices evolve, influence and are influenced by cultural and economic perceptions.

14 These two case studies are evidence that the collective imagination associated with French wines from the south of France tends to underestimate their historical and technical-scientific realities, and to essentialise a terroir that is nonetheless characterised by its territorial diversity. The study of these vineyards illustrates how the

circumscription of a terroir results from a mutual engendering between anthropisation and humanisation, in other words from an objective transformation of things through technique to their subjective transformation through symbol (Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la Parole*). Paradoxically, the standardised vision of the vineyards of the South of France freezes the reality of an area that is nonetheless continually shifting as a result of ecological, technical and social changes. These contributions help to shed light on this contradiction, showing the limits of thinking of Mediterranean culture as essentialized through the sole symbolic representation of its vineyards.

- 15 *Wheat, vines and olives* are thus seen as entry points for the study of transformations in social practices and representations in the Mediterranean, at different spatial and temporal levels of analysis. The articles in this issue make a valuable contribution to the wider analysis of Mediterranean societies, seen both in their unity and in their fragmentation.

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