

**Marc Conesa, Nicolas Poirier (dir.), Fumiers! Ordures! Gestion et usage des déchets dans les campagnes de l'Occident médiéval et moderne. Actes des XXXVIII<sup>es</sup> Journées internationales d'histoire de l'abbaye de Flaran, 14 et 15 octobre 2016, Toulouse (Presses universitaires du Midi) 2019, 302 p. (Flaran, 38), ISBN 978-2-8107-0609-9, EUR 25,00.**

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**Guy Geltner, Melbourne**

From cover to cover, this stimulating book brings to light the ways in which past societies managed waste, especially in the countryside. Or differently put, how communities extended certain matters in space and time in pursuit of sometimes competing agendas and under the restrictions imposed by matter itself and its physical surroundings. Ten case studies cover much of present-day France, with a further four chapters anchored in the British Isles, the southern Low Countries, northern Iberia and Majorca. The chronological scope is strategically broad, collectively stretching from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is designed to question common assumptions about periodization as regards for instance agricultural production and urban waste management. Last but not least, the volume as a whole, and not few of its constituents, straddle different methodologies and several archaeological and historical sub-disciplines, once again in a conscious (and by all means successful) attempt to underscore the value of working across traditional divides.

The articles are original, lucid and of consistently high quality. No brief review will do justice to any single one, but their ensemble makes some noteworthy interventions. First, the editors' use of the term *discards* (*déchets*) in the book's subtitle is clearly polemical. For whether we are dealing with human or animal excrement, artisanal byproducts (including animal parts) or plants, these tended to be moved from one alimentary or productive context to the next with a high degree of sophistication and sometimes at enormous labor costs (Thomas Labbé and Jean-Pierre Garcia; Gabriel Jover Avellà). Indeed, as many of the contributors show, »premodern« recycling of biodegradable matter was often an intentional effort that involved multiple nodes and human stakeholders, both local and regional, ad hoc and professional, men and women, rich and poor.

From a social perspective, moreover, matter's place and mobility helped trace the boundaries of the domestic and communal spheres, even in the smallest of villages (Claire Hanusse; Tristan Moriceau and Line Pastor), and linked urban and rural communities across an imagined medieval/modern divide and in ways that problematize a traditional center-periphery model (Patrick Fournier).



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To non-specialists, the volume also serves as a helpful reminder that archaeological sites themselves are instrumental in shaping present-day perceptions of waste; and conversely, that material remains (which are archaeologists' object by definition) can easily be confused with waste and thus skew, or at least narrow, our view of a given site. As several authors convincingly show, what is often archaeologically detectable today as waste deposits can be more fruitfully understood as one in a series of interlinked sites, each with its own set of goals and even audiences (Idoia Grau-Sologestoa). For instance, poor peasants performed their identity by mixing potsherds of clay into the manure they spread, a conscious act that distinguished their productive space from that of local elites (Richard Jones). In doing so they added a visual component to a landscape and a scent-scape that elites willingly rejected, but whose socially stratified realities were lost on no one. Finally, new zoo-archaeological and archaeo-botanical methods provide a granular view of deposits' constitutions (Jérôme Ros, Marie-Pierre Ruas and Charlotte Hallavant), allowing us in turn to reconstruct what was placed where during diverse processes, as well as how such practices changed over time.

Cultural historians of waste (and of materiality more broadly) would be remiss, then, to ignore archaeological methods and their insights. This holds especially true in the case of fertilization, arguably the best documented and studied manner in which matter was (re)used in the rural context. For, as this volume shows, fertilizer too reached fields, orchards and vineyards along different paths, ranging from un/intentional »direct deposit« by grazing animals, on carts drawn by cultivators or entrepreneurs, mixed with water through manually operated pumps or major hydraulic works, and often in a combination thereof.

Fertilizer itself could be specially prepared, including by drying and mixing different components considered suitable to specific soils, conditions and seasons. Several chapters specifically decenter dung, arguing that there was a rather broad range of what was used as fertilizer, including ash, peat, boxwood (Sylvain Olivier), seaweed (Emmanuelle Charpentier) and gorse (Isabelle Guégan), and reflecting local resources and needs as well as ongoing experimentation. This intense focus should come as little surprise, as lands' productivity had major economic and therefore political implications, and the production and acquisition of fertilizer drew people's attention across strata. Indeed, with the commercialization of agricultural production, the rush on fertilizer led to major changes in disciplining growing cities (Jean-Pierre Aguerre; Laurent Herment) a process that in some cases drove the development of dedicated infrastructures for its control and distribution (Pieter De Graef).

The editors penned an excellent introduction and conclusion, although the latter somewhat downplays the volume's success in interrogating a traditional medieval/modern divide. Scholarly reflection and empirical studies of fertilization techniques, for instance, are certainly better documented for later centuries, but



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household, medical, veterinary and other manuals, not to mention natural-scientific literature and urban statutes well before the seventeenth century had much to say on the matter, informed by ancient Greek, Roman and Islamic traditions. At any rate, rarely has a single volume illustrated so vividly Mary Douglas' famous assertion that »dirt is matter out of place«. While all chapters literally deal with human, animal, plant and artisanal refuse, they each do so to underscore these matters' evolving worth, to contemporaries as well as their later students.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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