

Research Proposal for the J. M. van Winter Stipend 2016

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Spicing up Life – Early Modern Europe's Encounter with South Asian Foodways

The research project represents a PhD-project which is currently conducted under the supervision of PD Dr. Susan Richter at Ruprecht – Karls – University in Heidelberg, Germany. It analyses the encounter of Europeans with the foodways in South Asia in the two centuries following the establishment of direct trade routes between Europe and India, i.e. 16th and 17th century. This is being contrasted with European ideas about nutrition in India in the preceding time of the late 15th century.

In the Late Middle Ages European ideas about eating in South Asia contained a lot of fictional knowledge. While the inhabitants of India in some cases were described as fantastic species themselves, like the dog-headed Cynocephaly, their nutrition was characterised in similar manner. A close reading of the texts however reveals that the description of the South Asian foodways was highly influenced by Christian religious belief. The consumption of apples by one of the mentioned species in Hartmann Schedel's world chronicle of 1493, for example, can be linked to the Forbidden Fruit in the biblical story of the Fall of Man in the context of the work. Thus the reader could relate to the inhabitants of South Asia and include them in his mindset, even though the unfamiliar physical features of the species suggests otherwise in the first moment.

In 1498 Vasco da Gama arrived in India. After that European ships sailed regularly to South Asia, carrying European travellers who had to accommodate with local food. This encounter was often described by the voyagers in their letters, travelogues and diaries. Observation of Indian foodways became essential in forming a new image of eatery in South Asia, profoundly different from the former one. Though eating still offered a possibility for Europeans to relate to the Indian natives, the mindset involved changed. Ideas about South Asian nutrition were not only formed by European Christian fictional storytelling but by actual interaction with the inhabitants. This interaction then was reflected in other European writings like descriptions of the world and even recipe collections, authored by people who never had travelled to India. A discourse about vegetarianism and its medicinal value was included in the nutritional recipe collection of British physician Thomas Moffett published in 1655, for example. Also first traces of imitation of South Asian food can be found latest by the 17th century. The research project scrutinizes this development of the European ideas on South Asian foodways from the late 15th to the 17th century.



Therefore it relies on source material such as recipe collections (medicinal and culinary), cosmographies and world descriptions, travelogues, letters and diaries of travellers to India and botanical works.

It applies current cultural and postcolonial theories (e.g. transcultural theory as developed at Ruprecht-Karls-University Heidelberg) together with a humanities' approach on nutritional theory (e.g. Hans-Jürgen Teuteberg's understanding of food in society) to be able to better understand the nutritional interaction between India and Europe.