

Editorial: Farming the City

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, urban agriculture is rapidly gaining importance.¹ All over the world, urban dwellers gather to cultivate crops and vegetables or to raise some poultry or pigs, often on a cooperative basis and on small plots of ‘marginal’ land. In an urban world characterised by globalising food markets and social polarisation – but also by increasing food insecurity –, citizens practice urban agriculture in a combined effort to diversify their food supplies, shorten the food chain and strengthen community life. Urban agriculture today is a highly diversified and multi-layered phenomenon, and its roots are both very old and very recent. Throughout European history it has appeared in different forms and guises. In some parts of Europe, urban agriculture seems to have declined at an early stage, whereas in others food production remained part and parcel of the urban economy until very recently, both as a component of a diversified household economy and in a highly specialised and professionalised form (for instance as horticulture or viticulture). Today, this urban agricultural heritage might offer inspiration to those who are looking for *low-tech* alternatives to high-precision and energy-intensive variants of urban agriculture like so-called vertical farms.²

It has already been noted that in most current discussions urban agriculture is treated as a new phenomenon and that this might have to do with its neglect in the prevailing historiography on towns and urbanisation.³ Due to a long tradition, going back to the nineteenth century, of defining towns as “big non-agrarian settlements”,⁴ historians are indeed ill equipped to tackle the new challenge of providing a historical background to this societal

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- 1 This is also mirrored by research networks such as the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Action TD 1106 Urban Agriculture Europe (2012–2016), which has produced the “Barcelona Declaration on Urban Agriculture and the Common Agricultural Policy”. See Frank Lohrberg et al. (eds.), *Urban Agriculture Europe*, Berlin 2015, and http://www.urban-agriculture-europe.org/files/130624_barcelona_declaration_on_urban_agriculture.pdf (last visited 2 Feb. 2020). On the global scale, the “Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and Framework for Action”, launched in 2015 by FAO and signed by 167 cities from 63 countries, is a major initiative in this context. See Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (ed.), *The Role of Cities in the Transformation of Food Systems: Sharing Lessons from Milan Pact Cities*, Rome 2018, <http://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CA0912EN.pdf> (last visited 2 Feb. 2020).
- 2 See, for instance, the recent Herrenhausen Conference in Hannover on *Urban Agricultural Heritage and the Shaping of Future Cities*, 6–8 May 2019. A conference report is available under: http://www.ua-heritage.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Conference-Summary_Urban-Agricultural-Heritage.pdf (last visited 2 Feb. 2020).
- 3 Ruth Glasser, *The Farm in the City in the Recent Past: Thoughts on a More Inclusive Urban Historiography*, in: *Journal of Urban History* 44/3 (2018), 501–518.
- 4 See, for a recent example of this approach to defining a ‘town’, Ferdinand Oppl, *Das Werden der mittelalterlichen Stadt*, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 280 (2005), 561–589, 564.

demand and the initiatives connected with it. Whatever else is marshalled in the numerous attempts to define a town and urbanity in European (or Western) historiography, especially when they are concerned with medieval origins, the functional difference between town and country is generally stressed.⁵ The other criterion, intimately connected with the functional definition, is demographic and relies on a – unavoidably arbitrary – threshold of the number of inhabitants, usually set at 5,000 or 10,000 people.⁶

This functional cum demographic separation of town and country is, in both respects, a “deceptively simple dichotomy”.⁷ From the functional perspective, it necessarily neglects the involvement of towns, both large and small, in agriculture as well as the production and processing of agricultural goods and commodities by their inhabitants in the European past; from the demographic perspective it neglects the fact that a significant proportion of pre-modern European towns fell below the applied thresholds, relegating large parts of Europe to the status of non-urbanisation until the nineteenth century. This has not gone unnoticed. In his introduction to a volume on *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Clark stated:

“Throughout the medieval and early modern period the small town, with a few hundred or thousand people, often clustered behind stone or earthen ramparts, with farms and orchards in its midst, and a handful of public buildings around the marketplace, was a constant and quintessential feature of the European landscape. [...] Across Europe, there were five or more times as many small towns as all other kinds of urban community put together.”⁸

Nevertheless, the functional and/or demographic definition of towns and urbanity continues to dominate the more synthetic accounts of the past constitutions of European towns and of economic development in general. It is, for example, widely used to estimate changes in

5 To cite only two prominent authors: Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities. Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, 3rd revised printing, Princeton 1939, 212: “If we wished [...] to sum up its essential points in one phrase, perhaps it would be possible to say that the city of the Middle Ages [...] was a commercial and industrial commune living in the shelter of a fortified enclosure and enjoying a law, an administration and a jurisprudence of exception which made it a collective, privileged personality.” Susan Reynolds, *English Towns in a European Context*, in: Jörg Jarnut/Peter Johanek (eds.), *Die Frühgeschichte der europäischen Stadt im 11. Jahrhundert (Städteforschung A 43)*, Köln/Weimar/Wien 1998, 207–218, 208: “My definition [...] has two parts. The first part is functional: a town is a permanent and concentrated human settlement in which a significant proportion of the population is engaged in non-agricultural occupations [...]. A town therefore normally lives, at least partly, off food produced by people who live outside it.” Reynold’s second criterion is the identity and the self-perception of the inhabitants of town and countryside. See also her study *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1997, 155–158. A thoughtful discussion of the advantages and drawbacks of a purely functional definition is found in Stephan R. Epstein, Introduction. *Town and Country in Europe, 1300–1800*, in: idem (ed.), *Town and Country in Europe, 1300–1800*, Cambridge 2011, 1–29.

6 Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500–1800*, London 1984, after opting for a functional definition, set the threshold “for separating urban from rural places” at 10,000 inhabitants and is convinced that, “so long as the threshold level used for one of these criteria, population, is as high as 10,000 the others hardly need to be examined” (53). His other criteria are “population densities, percentages of the workforce in non-agricultural occupations and a measure of diversity in the occupational structure” (22).

7 Epstein, Introduction, 1.

8 Peter Clark, Introduction, in: idem (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1995, 1–21, 1; see also Epstein, Introduction, 1–2.

agricultural productivity by breaking down populations into urban, rural agricultural and rural non-agricultural, and then applying the urban ratios thus established to measure agricultural labour productivity over space and time.⁹ It is highly significant that research on proto-industrial production has led to the differentiation of the rural population into agricultural and non-agricultural sections, whereas the urban population (identified by applying the usual size thresholds) is always – with some caveats of low significance – considered to be non-agricultural.¹⁰ For the moment, it can only be surmised how the results of this kind of measurement would change if we lowered the demographic threshold to include the other four fifths of (small) towns into the urban ratio and split the urban population into agricultural and non-agricultural. Needless to say, this would be as arbitrary as splitting the rural population into these categories, considering the frequent combination of agrarian and non-agrarian occupations in town and countryside. It would certainly raise – perhaps even double – absolute urban ratios, especially for those regions where most towns were below the size threshold usually applied, but would it also change their relative standing with respect to more urbanised regions? Conversely, we could also ask to what extent the consideration of the weight of agricultural activities in the now more numerous towns would change the gaps in the estimates of regional agricultural productivity. It is far from clear that these sample changes would counterbalance and leave the results unchanged.¹¹

Was the presence of agrarian occupations in towns simply a matter of size? Given the fact that a town of 10,000 inhabitants required about 9,000 hectares to secure its supply of bread grains in a preindustrial environment, there must have been limits of size to the self-sufficiency of towns in terms of food provisioning. Climbing up the size scale of towns, the interplay between urban food production and food markets tipped clearly in favour of the market.¹² However, we should, on the one hand, not underestimate the capacity of towns to cater for themselves given they had sufficient access to arable land. For a sample of twelve Swedish towns in the size bracket between 500 and 5,000 inhabitants, it has recently been calculated that their majority would, in theory, have been able to produce between 50 per cent and 100 per cent of the grain consumed in the respective town, up to and into the nineteenth century.¹³ On the other hand, urban agriculture was – in many instances, also including small towns – not limited to food production by and for the townspeople, but rather dedicated to highly commercialised branches of agriculture.

Was the presence and extent of urban agriculture a matter of location? In the context of the overarching and evolving division of labour within Europe, the size, growth potential and functional specialisation of towns in manufacture and trade clearly declined from the

9 This method, originally devised by E. A. Wrigley, *Urban Growth and Agricultural Change: England and the Continent in the Early Modern Period*, in: *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15/4 (1985), 683–728, is further developed by Robert C. Allen, *Economic Structure and Agricultural Productivity in Europe, 1300–1800*, in: *European Review of Economic History* 3 (2000), 1–25.

10 See, for example, Allen, *Economic Structure*, 4: “Clearly, some people lived in small cities and cultivated the surrounding fields or grazed stock on meadows and commons. There is no easy way to estimate the number of urban farmers, but their number was small as is the error from assuming it was zero.”

11 See Epstein, *Introduction*, 3 and 9, for a ponderation of similar questions.

12 See, for that matter, the contribution by Tim Soens in this volume.

13 Annika Björklund, *Historical Urban Agriculture. Food Production and Access to Land in Swedish Towns before 1900* (*Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis* 20), Stockholm 2010, 103–153, 135. See also the discussion of this matter for towns in Lesser Poland by Piotr Miodunka in this volume.

centre to the periphery. The economic constitution of the many Mediterranean, east-central European and Scandinavian agro-towns would then reflect the higher concentration and higher development of industry and merchant capital in the centre(s), and urban development and underdevelopment (if one associates the weight of agrarian production in towns with the latter) would constitute the opposite sides of the same coin. This conclusion has been stressed for some time in research on centre-periphery relations and certainly has merit, as long as one does not conflate urban agriculture with self-sufficient subsistence production and takes into consideration its often high degree of specialisation and commercialisation.¹⁴ But even before the core of European urbanisation moved from southern to north-western Europe during the seventeenth century, in most Mediterranean towns, both large and small, the landownership of citizens and agricultural production for the household and the market constituted an important sector of the urban economy.¹⁵

Finally, we could ask if the relationship of towns and agricultural production is a matter of the type of farming and land use. Although the involvement of towns in agrarian production spanned a wide spectrum from small-scale food production for subsistence over market gardening to fully developed commercial farming, there seems to have existed an urban preference for market-oriented branches of agrarian production such as viticulture, hops and tobacco growing, cattle-raising, and the processing of agrarian raw materials oriented towards regional and supra-regional markets (wine making and beer brewing, the processing of dye-plants), often in close interaction with and based on the institutionalised coercive power of towns over the surrounding countryside.

In order to understand the organisation, resilience and failure of urban agriculture – broadly defined as all forms of food production in an urban context involving urban citizens as producers – this issue of the *Rural History Yearbook* aims to develop a comparative and long-term approach, with a particular focus on the actors involved in urban agriculture, their income strategies, and the social and economic configurations in which they operate. Most contributions to this special issue resulted from a double session at the 2017 Rural History Conference in Leuven (Belgium), organised by the Comparative Rural History Network (CORN). In this session and the special issue, the contributors were asked to reflect upon the drivers and actors explaining the long-term continuity of urban agriculture in some contexts and its rapid demise in others.

In his introductory article, *Tim Soens* elaborates a conceptual and methodological framework for the study of urban agriculture in the past, emphasising the role of demography, property rights, the organisation of the household economy, the commercialisation and spe-

14 For east-central Europe, see Maria Bogucka, The Towns of East-Central Europe from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century, in: Antoni Maczak/Henryk Samsonowicz/Peter Burke (eds.), *East-Central Europe in Transition. From the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge/Paris 1985, 97–108; Vera Bácskai, Small Towns in Eastern Central Europe, in: Clark (ed.), *Small Towns*, 77–89, and Jaroslaw Miller, Urban Societies in East-Central Europe, 1500–1700, Aldershot 2008, 197–235. For southern Europe, see Juan E. Gelabert, Cities, Towns and Small Towns in Castile, 1500–1800, in: Clark, *Small Towns*, 271–294, and Daniel Curtis, Is There an ‘Agro-town’ Model for Southern Italy? Exploring the Diverse Roots and Development of the Agro-town Structure through a Comparative Case Study in Apulia, in: *Continuity and Change* 28/3 (2013), 377–419.

15 Corrado Vivanti, Città e campagne, in: Ruggiero Romano (ed.), *Storia dell’economia italiana*, vol. 2: *Letá moderna: verso la crisi*, Torino 1991, 243–283.

cialisation of the 'agrarian' economy in the urban hinterland, the institutional framework and, finally, the role of crises (famine, warfare) disrupting normal food chains. *Roberto Leggero* and *Mirella Montanari* identify two different forms of development and resilience of urban agrarian production in northern Italy during the communal age by comparing the Piedmont cities of Chieri and Novara. Both cities had spaces of agricultural use within their walls and intensely regulated peri-urban agriculture, but developed specific relationships with their wider rural environment due to different ecological settings. Chieri, situated in a dry hill area, colonised her *contado* by planting vines and establishing small farm units cultivated by sharecroppers. Novara, on the plain traversed by the river Ticino, specialised in raising cattle on irrigated meadows. *Henry French* reminds us that towns, in his case 170 English towns, often possessed extensive commons. He explores the relationship between the agrarian and political governance of these urban common lands in the early modern period by pondering Elinor Ostrom's "Common Pool Resource" model against approaches stressing the unequal distribution of power within urban communities. French concludes that the longevity and eventual abolition of urban commons in England involved the assertion of the access rights of a privileged minority in the towns and its challenge by reforms designed to redistribute power through the expansion of corporate electorates.

Piotr Miodunka's paper addresses the agrarian features of the many small towns of south-western Poland, where agriculture was the primary source of income for the majority of inhabitants until the late nineteenth century. Drawing on the cadastral survey established by the government of Austrian Galicia in the 1780s, he analyses to what extent these towns were self-sufficient in their grain supply. *Pieter De Graef* and *Wouter Ronsijn* explore the entire spectrum of urban agriculture in the Flemish towns of Oudendaarde and Kortrijk in the nineteenth century through a micro-level approach using data on households from agricultural censuses, population registers and tax lists. In contrast to the situation in Polish towns, only about 10 per cent of the population of the much larger Flemish towns had access to agricultural land, which was very unequally distributed. The social continuum from home food growers to professional gardeners and farmers overlapped with a geographical continuum from urban core to rural fringe, stretching from small garden plots cultivated by self-provisioning households to produce vegetables and potatoes in the city centres to farms producing cereals and other crops as well as holdings of professional gardeners on the outskirts of the towns.

Ines Peper investigates the establishment and constitution of the mining company settlement Eisenheim in Germany's Ruhr district, where housing and access to land were provided by the company to attract and bind workers as well as to supplement their wages. She places this model of transition between traditional village and proletarian urban district within the context of similar projects, such as the settlements of the Moravian Church community in Herrnhut and other places, and the garden allotment initiatives and garden city projects in nineteenth century German towns, considering them as forerunners of many current projects of urban gardening. *Åsa Ahrland* presents a long-term perspective on the urban development of Södermalm island in Stockholm. In the course of the expansion of the Swedish capital, the island was transformed from an agrarian supply zone first into a gardening zone, where vegetables and tobacco were cultivated, then into an industrial district with a large working class population and allotment gardens, until it underwent gentrification at the turn to the twenty-first century. She identifies the establishment of the modern Swedish welfare state as the key to understanding why urban agriculture disappeared in Södermalm.

In *Erich Landsteiner's* paper, vine-growing and wine production are discussed as specific forms of urban agriculture in late medieval and early modern (central) Europe. Refuting the implications of the concept of *Ackerbürgerstadt*, he investigates the economic and social characteristics of vine-growing towns by drawing on the examples of Vienna and Retz, a small town in Lower Austria, stressing the high degree of social differentiation, the endemic class-struggles between bourgeois vineyard owners and wage labourers, and the regulation of the wine market by the town authorities. *Johannes Koder's* contribution on the provisioning of Constantinople with vegetables mirrored in the *Geoponica* is the only paper not presented in the session at the 2017 Rural History Conference in Leuven. It is included here as a very welcome extension of the geographical and chronological scope of this collection.

In the section for papers beyond the scope of the thematic issue, which we introduced only recently with the 2019 issue of the Yearbook, *Carine Pachoud* and *Markus Schermer* present a case study of the artisanal Serrano cheese value chain in Southern Brazil. The authors analyse strategies for building a resilient value chain by studying the role of social capital in the balance between maintaining traditions and the emergence of territorial innovations. Serrano cheese is produced by beef cattle farmers in the Campos de Cima da Serra region in the Brazilian states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Pachoud and Schermer explore the historical development of cheese production in this area in relation to findings from their interviews with local actors conducted in 2017 and 2018. They observe that the recent creation of producers' associations which connect different actors through linking and bridging social capital was vital for territorial innovation to emerge. This study offers new perspectives on traditional food value chains in rural mountain areas that are often excluded from current discussions on globalised and production-oriented agriculture.

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