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BOOK REVIEWS



Fruit from the Sands: The Silk Road Origins of the Foods We Eat. Robert N. Spengler III. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. 392 pp., 32 b&w photos, 1 line drawing, 4 maps. Hardcover and eBook US \$35, £29; Paperback US \$27, £23. ISBN 9780520379268.

Reviewed by Martin JONES, *McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research,*
University of Cambridge

Fruits from the Sands is an elegantly written and important book. It launches its account from the most pressing issue of life on earth today—how do we feed nine billion plus people without destroying the very ecosystems upon which we rely to provide that food? How have several millennia of food globalization led to a highly interconnected over dependence on global monocultures? Those questions take us directly to an epicentre of ancient food globalization in Central Asia, where the author has over several years made a significant contribution to primary research. That first-hand experience of research in the area allows his pen to bring the region to life, not as an exotic other, but as a thriving and productive heart of the continent. This wonderful combination of first-hand scientific knowledge, a diverse and eclectic awareness of textual sources, and an engaging writing style is reminiscent of Oliver Rackham (2006). Just as Rackham's books are taken off the shelves and dipped into for a long long time, I anticipate the same will be true of *Fruits from the Sands*. There is a wealth of timeless insight within, supported by a generous section of endnotes and references.

Robert Spengler is a leading archaeobotanist of Central Asia, conducting primary research on physical fragments of ancient food plants recovered from archaeological excavations. The focus of much archaeobotanical research around the world has been upon the beginnings of agriculture, around one or

another of the “centres of origin” first identified around a century ago by the pioneer crop geneticist Nikolai Vavilov (1926). Spengler's own focus, and the theme of this book, relates to a subsequent episode when crops moved between the Old World centres of origin some millennia after their original domestication, it is presumed through processes of migration, exchange, and trade. This led to a state of “food globalization” in which economic plants initially from the west and the east, the north and the south, were brought together within the same agricultural and culinary systems, a pattern that was widely in place by the end of prehistory. Economic species originally from China were to be found in Europe and from Southwest Asia in China. Asian crops reached sub-Saharan Africa and crops from each of these geographic regions arrived to enrich South Asian food-ways in the Indus Valley.

Both the title and the cover image draw attention to one potential agent—the exotic journeys of merchant caravans across the arid Asian sands in pursuit of Silk Road trade. The text within reveals a richer, older story underpinning that transcontinental contact. Up in the foothills of the Tianshan mountains, in the very heart of Asia, Spengler has been working with archaeologist Michael Frachetti on early sites from a time when life existed in an environment very different from that of the arid sands shown in the foreground of this book's cover image. High mountain streams kept the foothills grassy and animals could

graze. There, herders could plant small plots with hardy grain. At sites like Begash in Kazakhstan, these small-scale herders were exchanging seedcorn with their neighbours, so they were able to consume crops from both east and west Eurasia. What is more, this was taking place a full two thousand years before a series of merchants and armies were accompanied by the creators and narrators of a more prominent and familiar history. All this puts Spengler in an excellent position to review and interrogate the familiar traditional story of Silk Road trade and look back in time through his keen archaeobotanical eye to that history's long prelude. He brings his own expertise and an engaging writing style to the task.

Part One offers insight into the region whose history and archaeobotany the author knows best. Rather like a whistle-stop tour of the modern Asian food markets illustrated here and there in the book, the text tumbles over endless fruits, vegetables, spices, and grains, interweaving familiar stories of mediaeval and early modern traders, with much fresher evidence of the rather deeper history of food movement than archaeobotany has revealed in recent years.

After this expansive start, in which plants and landscapes come alive, from Part Two up until the concluding chapter, the text homes in on the plants themselves. For three quarters of the book, the economic plants are the stars, and world history is viewed through the lens of seeds, leaves, and fruits. For those who can stay the course, these chapters abound with riches and insights, but the most satisfied readers will be those who already bring to their reading a keen and patient interest in plants. Such readers will not be put off by four successive chapters on cereal grains, for example, but will find them thoughtful, up-to-date, and complemented here and there by most interesting anecdotes. Who knew, for example, that Asian pilaf was commonly made from barley, rather than rice, or about the ancient Sarmatian trick of enriching millet porridge with blood freshly drawn from a horse's thigh?

These chapters within Part Two proceed through a familiar categorization of consumed plants, commencing with cereal grains and ending with tea, with a clear emphasis upon

sustenance of the body rather than the mind. Tea is the only psychoactive plant that gets headline billing. Alcohol receives some attention within the chapter on "Grapes and Apples," which is illustrated with some engaging carved reliefs of "Dionysian" party-goers, suitably lubricated with wine, from Central Asia. The same chapter mentions *Cannabis* (a plant of Central Asian origin that had spread both eastwards and westwards by the end of prehistory) in passing. Opium (a western plant in China by the Tang Dynasty) is absent from the index. Narcotics and psycho-active plants have, in the past, been repeatedly at the forefront of the expansion and enlargement of world systems, with recurrent roles in both feasting and meeting with strangers. Spengler touches briefly on various aspects of that role in his comments on alcohol in the "Grapes and Apples" chapter; his reflections on the psychoactive group as a whole would certainly have been interesting to learn.

Just as textual evidence comes with strong biases towards the mercantile and the militaristic, so is archaeobotanical evidence far from impartial. Instead, it is biased towards those compact hard seeds that endure most successfully in archaeological sediments. Thus, a substantial part of the book (five chapters) takes the reader through a comprehensive list of grains and legumes. Soft fruits, leaves, and oils do nonetheless receive attention in later chapters.

Spengler is well aware of the substantial contribution genetics has made to his theme, and there are many useful and detailed references to those sources. However, the book's main strength is in conveying the interplay between archaeobotany and history; genetics is to a great extent taken as read. It is assumed throughout that readers will know who Nikolai Vavilov was (rather confusingly introduced as a "European Explorer" on page 8).

While this field is very active and fast changing, I believe Spengler has got it right in launching his narrative from the third millennium B.C. I say that, having myself published papers pushing grain spread several millennia earlier, before improvements in radiocarbon dating allowed us to interrogate

and dispose of some of the earlier published dates (Motuzaite-Matuzeviciute et al. 2013). I remain intrigued by the possibility, of which there remain tantalizing hints in the robust data, that the story will be pushed back further still, that the globalization of food resources has been a perennial theme of farming life. But that is speculation and a matter for ongoing research. For a robust, detailed, and critically sound reading of the evidence as it currently exists, *Fruits from the Sands* serves very well.

Looking beyond these central chapters to the book's wider narrative arc, we encounter two distinct versions of "Asia" vying for our attention. The first is profoundly historical and concerned with world systems in the long process of becoming and evolving, not just looking back in time, but also looking forward to a world in which nine billion people need food. It is with this version of Asia that the book boldly and persuasively launches.

The second version of Asia is, by contrast, essentially ahistorical, a liminal and exotic "other" viewed from afar. It is with this version that the book ends. Here, in the final chapter, the text changes course. It holds back from offering answers to the issues raised in Part One and instead lures us back towards the romance of well-known narratives of merchants and adventurers attached to the notion of the Silk Road and captured in the book's cover image. This final chapter does, at a certain point, come to the elements in which Spengler's own research has contributed greatly, that the merchants and armies come at the end of a very long story, not at its start.

For centuries, millennia before they could strike out across the arid sands of the continental interior, generations of herders and farmers had toiled and gained an understanding of the diverse ecological niches up in the hills and closer to the rainclouds and snow. The writers that travelled with the merchants and were commissioned by the army generals neither knew about them nor wrote about

them, and in any case had a vested interest in placing historical agency elsewhere. Archaeobotanists have been able to reveal much about their lives, however, lives that I believe do have something to offer within the contemporary debates boldly introduced in Part One of this book. Spengler nonetheless holds back from addressing his own questions, and instead winds up this most informative text with Owen Lattimore's (1928) somewhat nostalgic reflection upon a timeless "other," upon the caravan of plodding pedlars with their "little bundles" fading into a distant sandy horizon as modernity gets on with its urgent business.

Perhaps in Spengler's next book, we may hear his thoughts on what we can actually learn from the generations of much earlier communities of the Asian foothills and how they may teach us about the pressing issues of food security today. In the meantime, *Fruits from the Sands* offers a most informative journey, drawing upon a diverse wealth of sources, through the economic plants that have been taken across the continent. Engagingly written by a pioneering researcher in the field, this book is to be recommended to any readers with a contemporary or historical interest in Asian foodways and food plants.

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