

Book Reviews

PIERO CAMPORESI, *Bread of dreams: food and fantasy in early modern Europe*, transl. David Gentilcore, Oxford, Polity Press, 1989, 8vo, pp. 212, £19.50.

Bread, deliberately flavoured or adulterated by herbs and seeds of cannabis and poppy, mouldy or accidentally made from grain contaminated by a fungus from which LSD can be derived, consumed in conditions of chronic malnutrition and hunger, was responsible for individual mental aberration and collective delirium. This is one of the themes of Piero Camporesi's *Bread of dreams*. In this very startling work he argues that the reality of material existence was tempered for the poor of medieval Italy by the regular consumption of naturally-occurring drugs and by dreams, in hunger-induced hallucination, of bread in plenty at a future harvest never attained. Although Professor Camporesi says that destitution destroyed the spirit, infestation of worms decayed the flesh, and tramps and beggars were the metaphorical worms which threatened the granaries of the rich, one looks in vain in his work for an assessment of the part played by the phantasmagoria of sickness.

By his account, "the culinary recipe, the sorcerer's composition, the apothecary's prescription, the herbalist's unguent and the ointment seller's remedy" provided for all levels of society a pharmacopoeia promising health and protection, riches and longevity or oblivion and ecstasy. These themes are richly and vividly illustrated from contemporary literature, songs and poems. Roy Porter's preface to the book (without which interpretation would be very difficult), sets the work in the context of European research into medieval and early modern peasant society and explains that the author's intention is to shock the reader into an awareness of the "unbearable harshness of reality" so that the fears and aspirations of the population may be appreciated just as, by other means, a grassroots understanding of more recent peasant and artisan communities has been accomplished. If this is indeed Professor Camporesi's intention there is a danger that the strength of his imagery may hide his very important message and send the wrong signals about the effects of the drug content of natural substances.

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ALBERT DIETRICH (ed.), *Dioscorides triumphans: ein anonymer arabischer Kommentar (Ende 12. Jahrh. n. Chr.) zur Materia medica*, pt. 1, *Arabischer Text*, pp. 216, pt. 2, *Übersetzung und Kommentar*, pp. 752, *Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philolog.-Hist. Klasse, Folge 3, nos. 172–3*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 8vo, illus., DM 360, (paperback).

Dietrich's careful study of a unknown Dioscorides commentator is a significant contribution to the history of pharmacy and medicine and it has importance in the study of linguistics and the history of science. The twelfth-century author possessed a highly unusual critical spirit and wrote for students who needed precise identifications of drugs. He reasserted Dioscorides' call for knowledge to be based on personal experience, but said that his text had numerous errors, some because of faulty knowledge of the text, but some because of a lesser knowledge of drugs in Dioscorides' time than his own. He even pointed out that there were different levels of knowledge between his own time, the twelfth century, and the periods of earlier commentators not so far separated from his own. The commentary is only on the first four books—the fifth book, he said, dealt in part with medicinal wines that were of no interest to him. He was concerned with nomenclature and identification. A full chapter (generally devoted to a single plant) would have the lemma or title in Arabic transliteration of Dioscorides' Greek, Arabic translation, and comments first by Ibn Juljul (died after AD 994), and secondly by 'Abdallāh b. Šāliḥ, whose observations were extensive and not restricted to botanical identifications. Both of these earlier commentators had employed texts of Dioscorides derived from the various recensions of Stephanos-Hunain; Dietrich observes that the full understanding of Dioscorides' transmissions cannot be known until modern texts of this tradition are established. The anonymous twelfth-century commentator took issue with his predecessors on many points,