Bread, Beer & the Seeds of Change: Agriculture's Imprint on World History


Bread, Beer & the Seeds of Change provides a unique perspective that crosses boundaries of agriculture, history, anthropology, and food and environmental sciences. The authors are a husband-wife team; Thomas Sinclair is a crop physiologist with world-wide research experience in all of the major agronomic crops, and Carol Sinclair is an independent researcher who has integrated her interests in travel and cuisines from around the world into an agricultural and historical perspective.

The 16 chapters of the book plus an epilogue are divided into three main sections: Part I-Background: The “Seeds”, Part II-Early Agricultural Societies, and Part III-Technology Advances in Western Society: The “Changes.” Individual chapters average 11 pages in length and can generally be read leisurely in 10 to 15 minutes. The prose is simple, without jargon, and is accessible to undergraduate students or a general, nonscientific audience. Illustrations are black and white drawings, sketches, and maps that supplement descriptions of ancient agricultural tools, geography, and botanical structures. Several chapters also have ‘text boxes’ that provide additional details about a point of particular interest. Although individual citations are not included in the text, each chapter has a reference section from which materials are drawn.

The authors propose that one factor that transitioned hunter-gatherer societies was the human desire for fermented – and its mood-altering properties. The book also considers the arduous charged with producing grain, nutritious developed from a diet consisting mostly of beer, and the fundamentals of how grain was harvested, and prepared to make bread.

The second section of the book (chapters 7 through 11) provides case studies for five early, agricultural societies dating from around 3500 BCE to 150 BCE. Societies include the Sumerians, Egyptians, Chinese, Bantu, and the Maya. For each society the authors provide information about their environments including water and nutrients (primarily nitrogen) for the crops. Each chapter discusses major innovations that each society developed for producing grain and how grain was processed for bread and beer production. The authors show that were available for crop production, and sustainability of agricultural production. They also describe the labor and efforts for crop production, and whether or were available after grain production efforts in these societies, such as the pyramids by the Egyptians. For each societies, the authors discuss probable reasons.

The third section of the book (chapters 12 through 16) traces agricultural development in western societies from the Athenians and Romans (550 BCE to 410 CE) to modern times. The authors also consider the influence of crop production on the development of Western society.