Historical Research on Food Consumption in Poland

STUDIES ON THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN HISTORY should not be limited to investigating the history of production. Man stands all his life between production and processing—between consumption and the exchange of goods. This determines the development in the use of material goods in relation to changes in the conditions of his existence. Historical studies in Poland attach much importance to all problems concerning each form of consumption, and amongst the whole set of those problems, that of food consumption seems to stand first. The importance of food consumption studies was adequately estimated in the period of positivism by French historians. An eminent historian, Louis Boudreau, wrote in his "Histoire de l'alimentation" at the end of the 19th century, ... "the bill of fare of a banquet will better serve the knowledge of human affairs than the description of the events of war, a cookery book better than a set of diplomatic papers, and the statistics of food products than a story of court intrigues".

Prominent Polish ethnographers and sociologists were already stressing the importance of studies on food consumption at the beginning of the 20th century. Their considerations gave a basis to the first discussions of theoretical, historical and economic problems, notably by J. Rutkowski in the period between the two World Wars1. A. Maurizio’s irreplaceable work on vegetable food consumption is world famous2.

Research on food consumption on a larger scale and supported by new theoretical assumptions was resumed in Poland after the second World War.

Two methodological articles started the fresh research on alimentation, which thereafter developed greatly. A. Wycząński wrote about the use and proper analysis of written documents, taking as examples the registers and bills of the 16th century. M. Dembińska attempted to co-ordinate the analysis of written documents with that of archaeological, ethnographical and iconographical sources, making good use of data from the earlier periods3. For a long time Polish archaeologists had been drawing attention to excavation material that threw light on the alimentation of early mediaeval societies and also those of very remote periods. Palaeobotanic and palaeozoologic investigations were very helpful. The first stage of research documented only the presence or absence of particular animal or plant species and their abundance. In the post-war years, the amount of meat consumed at these early periods had already been calculated on a weight of flesh to bone ratio, and it was also possible to tell what kind of meat prevailed at a given period. It was possible to say that in the early and late Middle Ages,

2. A. Maurizio, Posywiecie roślinne i rolnictwo w rozwoju dziejowym [Vegetable Food and Agriculture in the Evolution of History], Warszawa 1926. A. Maurizio was a Pole whose family came from Italy. He was also professor in Zürich and wrote his books in German.
pork was more often consumed than beef, but changes occurred from the 14th century on. Palaeobotanists also applied different methods to their studies on vegetable remains, trying to indicate the dynamics of development in the cultivation of certain plants during various periods. Excavation results indicate a rather large consumption of meat in the early Middle Ages even among the lower social classes and a wide knowledge of different corn species in the mediaeval cultivation pattern. These problems were also of interest to historians sensu stricto.

In 1963 there appeared a monograph on 10th—15th century food consumption in Poland, with particular emphasis on the 14th and 15th centuries, a period which was luckily represented by a quantity of source material in Polish archives.

The first attempts to relate food consumption to economic history were in two interesting articles by A. Wyczanski and B. Baranowski. They did not simply

4. Here are several examples: M. Kubasiewicz, O metodyce badań wykopalskich kościzwierzących [On the Method of Excavation Research concerning Animal Bones], In: Materiały Zasobnictwo-Pomorskie, vol. II Szczecin, 1956 pp. 235—244; W. Holubowicz, M. Kubasiewicz, Kowalcy w wczesnośredniowiecznym [Animal Bones as Historical Sources], In: Dawna Kultura 1954, no. 2 pp. 75—81; M. Sobociński, Spóźnienie misea na wczesnośredniowiecznym grodzie w Bonikow, pow. Kościan [Consumption of Meat in the Early Mediaeval Castle of Bonikow], In: Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej, An. IX 1961, No. 4 pp. 771—77; see also Wyczanski 1960 (s. note 3) and Dembińska 1963 (s. note 7).


7. M. Dembińska, Konsumpcja żywnoścowa w Polsce średnicowej [Food Consumption in Mediaeval Poland], Warszawa 1963, 263 pp., Tables; See also on the same subject by A. Kowalska-Lewicka, Pozywienie dzielne w średniowieczu i przydatność badawcza źródek etnograficznych [Peasants’ Food in the Middle Ages and the Usefulness of Ethnographic Sources for our Studies], In: Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej, An. XIII, no. 4 1965 pp. 755—766.

describe the alimentation of certain social or professional groups, but attempted to establish certain per capita standards of weight and calorific content of daily food consumption, on the basis of accessible sources.

The appearance of King Zygmunt III's royal kitchen was the subject of a very good article. This is an important contribution to the research on alimentation in royal courts, including that of the royal Wasa family in Sweden. A more comprehensive collective work on nutrition in early Poland appeared in 1967 and also took into account papers by archaeologists, ethnographers and historians. This volume contains studies concerning various problems, which have hitherto been taken into account only peripherally.

The effects of eating and drinking on human health was the subject of Z. Kuchowicz's research. Another author, T. Sobczak, attempted to pinpoint alterations in food consumption in the Kingdom of Poland in the 19th century, making use chiefly of statistical material.

An attempt at estimating the daily rations of food, especially those consumed by people belonging to professional and service groups, at various periods, has also been carried out in the literature on the subject in Poland.

13. See works of A. Wyczański mentioned above; also polemic article of M. Dembińska, Ration or Norms (see note 8), and of the same, Materialne i biologiczne warunki bytu [Material and Biological Conditions of Existence]. In: Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej, An. XVI fasc. 2 1968 pp. 361—371; some authors made use of a conventionally fixed annual quantity of consumed cereals per capita as the main basis for calculating the changes in economic potential, see J. Topolski, Wskaźnik wzrostu gospodarczego Polski od X—XX w. [An Index of the Economic Growth of Poland from the 10th to the 20th century]. In: Kwartalnik Historyczny, vol. 64, fasc. 4 1967 pp. 995—1012.
In closing this short review of historical methods and investigations on food consumption, I should like to mention that we also find many valuable contributions concerning this problem in more general and synthetic works, such as those of three eminent scientists studying our most ancient history: J. Kostrzewski\(^{14}\), W. Hensel\(^{15}\) and H. Löwmiański\(^{16}\). Moreover W. Kula, a well-known theoretician and economic historian, gives a foremost place in his methodological book to the problems of food consumption\(^{17}\).

Both historians and ethnologists interested in this matter may often find it useful to glance into volumes of the series concerning the material culture, and the history of rural economy: *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej* and *Studia i Materiały z Historii Kultury Materialnej*, particularly *Studia z dziejów gospodarstwa wiejskiego*.

Both publications are published by the Institute for the History of Material Culture.

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15. W. Hensel, *Słowiańszczyzna wczesnośredniorwiaeczna* [The Slavic Lands in the Early Middle Ages], third ed., Warszawa 1965 (pp. 678) and one in German.