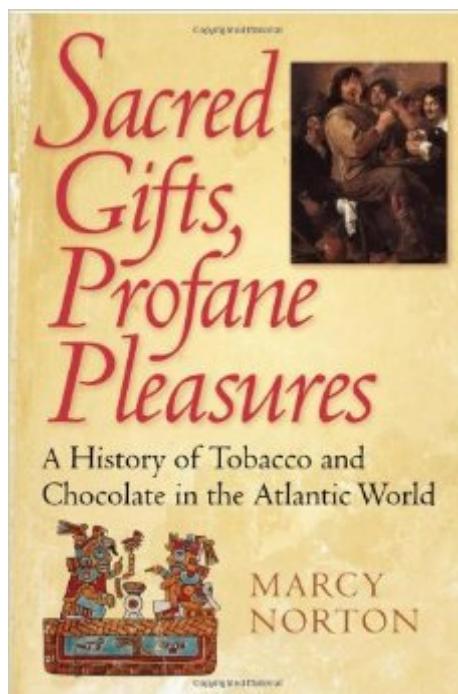


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Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History Of Tobacco And Chocolate In The Atlantic World



Synopsis

Before Columbus's fateful voyage in 1492, no European had ever seen, much less tasted, tobacco or chocolate. Initially dismissed as dry leaves and an odd Indian drink, these two commodities came to conquer Europe on a scale unsurpassed by any other American resource or product. A fascinating story of contact, exploration, and exchange in the Atlantic world, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures* traces the ways in which these two goods of the Americas both changed and were changed by Europe. Focusing on the Spanish Empire, Marcy Norton investigates how tobacco and chocolate became material and symbolic links to the pre-Hispanic past for colonized Indians and colonizing Europeans alike. Botanical ambassadors of the American continent, they also profoundly affected Europe. Tobacco, once condemned as proof of Indian diabolism, became the constant companion of clergymen and the single largest source of state revenue in Spain. Before coffee or tea became popular in Europe, chocolate was the drink that energized the fatigued and uplifted the depressed. However, no one could quite forget the pagan past of tobacco and chocolate, despite their apparent Europeanization: physicians relied on Mesoamerican medical systems for their understanding of tobacco; theologians looked to Aztec precedent to decide whether chocolate drinking violated Lenten fasts. The struggle of scientists, theologians, and aficionados alike to reconcile notions of European superiority with the fact of American influence shaped key modern developments ranging from natural history to secularization. Norton considers the material, social, and cultural interaction between Europe and the Americas with historical depth and insight that goes beyond the portrayal of Columbian exchange simply as a matter of exploitation, infection, and conquest.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Cornell University Press (January 5, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801476321

ISBN-13: 978-0801476327

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 0.9 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (4 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #330,567 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #73 inÂ Books > Cookbooks, Food & Wine > Cooking by Ingredient > Chocolate #114 inÂ Books > Business & Money > Investing >

Customer Reviews

Norton's well-researched, beautifully illustrated monograph treats an intriguing subject: how Native Americans used tobacco and chocolate before European contact, how and what Europeans learned about these substances, how tobacco and chocolate were introduced to Europe, and what cultural valences tobacco and chocolate shed, gained, or kept in the process. Norton argues that tobacco and chocolate arrived in Europe with strong connotations from their social and religious uses in the Americas, and that Europeans' knowledge of indigenous uses of these substances influenced how they were used in Europe. I found Norton's argument partly but not fully convincing. While she clearly demonstrates that early Spanish colonizers learned about Native American uses of tobacco and chocolate, and that traditional uses of tobacco and chocolate persisted in indigenous communities long after European contact, it seems that by the time these substances were well-established in Europe (which didn't really happen until the seventeenth century), their connection to traditional American uses was pretty tenuous. Norton's theoretical framework strikes me as heavy-handed, and some of her assertions as a little overblown. (My favorite line, apropos early modern Spain: "A day without chocolate came to be viewed as one of great suffering" (p. 195).) To my mind, *Sacred Gifts* doesn't quite live up to its excellent reviews. Still, it's an important work on the history of tobacco and chocolate; if you have a serious interest in the worldwide diffusion of those substances, don't miss it.

The author documents very carefully the history of these two substances from their cultivation and use in Central America to their spread to Europe and throughout the world. She emphasizes that Europe (the Spanish conquistadors etc.) certainly influenced (and changed) the ways of the Central American Indians but they in turn also greatly influenced the Europeans, more than most people today seem to understand.

Not a big fan of the way its written, a bit boring.

This book is really interesting. I had to read it for class and I really enjoyed it. I would recommend it to anyone who loves witchcraft.

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