
Caffeinated beverages in 16th century Bohemia

By Jan Velinger
October 2018

Anyone interested in the history of hot chocolate, tea and coffee would be thrilled to sit down with Karel Černý - the head of Prague's Institute of Medicine and Foreign Languages at Charles University's First Faculty of Medicine - as we did. Barring that, the next best thing may be to pick up his soon to be published history about caffeinated beverages in Central Europe in the 16th century.





20 min 55 sec

In our interview, the associate professor talks not only about those beverages but also explains why alcohol, by extension, was so important in centuries past.

“What we eat and why we eat certain foods, our preferences, is something that is heavily impacted by culture. If our diet was determined only by biology, then we would probably be eating a lot of insects. And there are of course parts of the world where insects are eaten: it all comes down to culture.

“We are very accustomed to consuming a lot of pork – it is a large part of our diet, embedded in traditional Czech cuisine – but in a Muslim country eating pork is absolutely unacceptable.

“Here, we have what is known as zabijačka that is the slaughter of a pig and the processing of literally every single part of the animal. And the whole pig is eventually consumed by the whole community. So culture is a very important determinant of food and diet. There is a plethora of drinks and foods that are framed by culture, including alcohol and alcoholic beverages, which are acceptable in Europe but not in Muslim countries where alcohol is forbidden.”

I was reading that, in terms of eating habits, for example, the three-meal day doesn't actually go back that far. For most of our history, breakfast was not eaten, regardless of whether it is the most important meal of the day. And in some cultures, such as the Roman Empire, it was even shunned.

“Yes, three meals a day is by no means the historical standard. Let me say, though, that the history of diet and of food is something that has been rather under-researched in the Czech Republic. What we know is that two meals a day prevailed certainly in medieval times. People would go to mass first and then have an early lunch and dinner, although it is debatable which meal was dominant.

“But a lot of details aren't well-documented: we have a lot of records of meals related to things like weddings between noble families. The other area where records are detailed in certain cases are those of Catholic religious orders, where prescribed meals throughout were written about in great deal.

“When it comes to the diet of poor people, with very few exceptions this is basically missing from our sources.”

I want to talk about the book you are working on but want to ask one thing: in general, has public interest in historic foods grown? Over the years, there seem to have been a few restaurants that opened up, such as in Český Krumlov, which served porridges or meals closer to what our predecessors ate. No idea whether they were accurate or just a chef's fancy, but I remember on one menu one meal was sprinkled with flower petals. The question is: are people interested in knowing more about historic food and drink?

“I definitely hope so. It is important to point out that [in the book] I don't try to 'sell' historical diets as more healthy, because they certainly are not. What I am focussing on is uncovering areas that may be a bit surprising for the contemporary consumer. Things like that there were at least two distinct kinds of cinnamon in the past, which will come as a surprise to readers. Or that there were several kinds of pepper. Some were from real pepper but some were from different plants but had a similar sensory quality and had a different way of getting that sharp 'punch'.

“One thing that surprised me was that chili was a part of chocolate recipes; today chili in chocolate is perceived as a novelty but it really is not.”



Let's talk about that: the book you are working on looks, among other things, at three beverages that were consumed as far back as...

"The 16th century in Europe. That was when people here started to consume these caffeinated beverages. But we mustn't forget in the case of cocoa it was consumed by native people for thousands of years in the Americas; in China the earliest archaeological findings date back to the before the Christian era.

"Coffee is of course much younger, basically we presume it was a medieval discovery even in the Arabic world. In Europe it is basically the 16th century when people tasted these beverages."

Chocolate was brought back from the New World...

"One thing that I am focussing on is trying to verify very early descriptions of those beverages. In the case of cocoa beans, the first information dates back to a history that was written by the second son of Christopher Columbus, Ferdinand. He wrote about one find in 1502 (although the descriptions was published some 70 years later), during Columbus' fourth voyage, when they seized a native canoe in which there was food like maize and also cocoa beans. At that time, Europeans had no idea what to do with cocoa beans although they observed that the natives put great value on them.

“That is related to the fact that the beans were actually used as money in Aztec or Mayan society. Instead of having coins, they were literally growing their money on trees. In the case of very wealthy Aztec chieftains they were literally eating their own money during festive opportunities.”

How was cocoa commonly consumed at that time?

“Well that is an interesting point. At the beginning, it was consumed nearly exclusively as a beverage. It had a very foamy head or top and that foam was the result of a high fatty content. Nowadays, we don’t have high fatty content in our cocoa because we remove it as cocoa butter (19th century technology). Before the 19th century, that wasn’t done and I would say that the drink had very different sensory qualities than what we would expect nowadays.”

“However, the earliest Czech mention of cocoa refers to kind of solid sweets or chocolate kisses dated pre-1650, which is kind of an outlier. It is unusual that our earliest reference dates back to food and not to the beverage.”

One more question about the beverage in Europe: was it served hot? And, also, there all those strange ingredients come to the fore again: chili and others...

“Ingredients included chili, garlic cloves, cinnamon, and achiote (Bixa Orellana), which was used for its red colouring, which contributed considerably to cocoa becoming associated with blood by the natives in the New World or why they believed there was relationship and ritual meaning between the chocolate drink and blood.

“But there wasn’t one single dominant recipe for serving chocolate and natives definitely consumed different versions including chocolate as a food mixed with maize flour. While in Europe the drink was probably only consumed hot, the Aztecs had a cold recipe.

Is it fair to say that coffee and tea, as they were introduced, gradually gained a stronger footing and the interest in hot chocolate faded?

“Well to a certain extent this is related to different political powers behind each of these beverages. In the case of chocolate, as we have already touched upon, it was Spain. The Czech lands or the Kingdom of Bohemia had sort of an exclusive relationship with the Spanish Empire due to the Habsburgs. The famous Emperor Rudolf II was educated at the Spanish court.

“Tea was of course introduced through the overseas route and traders were buying tea in China, transporting it around Africa and selling it on markets in Amsterdam. Coffee had two routes, one of which was across the Mediterranean from Cairo to Venice. It seems that chocolate was preferred by certain levels of society such as the clergy but tea and coffee came to dominate. Coffee became dominant in central Europe, Germany and northern Germany while tea dominated in England. There were economic reasons for their success: one has to take into account the role played by taxes, availability, England had the East India company and the only competition was the Dutch East India Company. The Germans had nothing comparable. So influences in which beverages caught hold were both economic and political.”



As is often the case, it comes down to the types of markets, the businesses involved, market share and other questions.

“Yes. The other thing that needs to be taken into consideration is the introduction of a particular culture associated with the given drink: that means things like coffee houses, for example, which were introduced for the first time in the 1680s in Vienna. But it was probably the English who witnessed the first major coffee house boom, in the whole second half of the 17th century London had hundreds of coffee houses long before Vienna. But in Central Europe it was Vienna.

“There are some very rare sources suggesting that there might have been something like a coffee house in Prague at that time. But the earliest confirmed coffeehouse in Prague is 1714.”

I heard a joke about the English bemoaning the fact that had it not been for the introduction of tea, they would still be drinking beer at four in the afternoon...

“That is one of the important things I am focussing on. Because, before the introduction of these beverages, Europeans were drinking alcohol much more. For cultural reasons, for example, wine was considered to be extremely healthy. But there were also practical reasons: without the benefit of understanding microbiology, Europeans drank alcohol simply as a way to sanitise beverages – to avoid food poisoning.

“They didn’t have any concept of bacteria and of how safe drinking water might be. And it wasn’t. Drinking water could be a risky business. Even little children from an early age drank mildly alcoholic beverages. Then you have to take into account technological advances such as distillation and so on.”

That is fascinating, that water was such a questionable thing since we still take it so for granted.

“And with coffee, tea, and chocolate you have to boil the water, therefore you make it healthy... and safe.”

One of the final things I want to ask about is the fact that these beverages have caffeine. How well was that understood?

“Physicians at that time had no idea, perceiving most food and drink as a homogeneous mass. Wine was perceived as a homogenous liquid simply called wine – not a mixture of water and alcohol, etc. It follows that they had no concept of caffeine.”

They didn’t have the benefits of modern chemistry...

“But there are clear signs that physicians and other observers were aware of the effects of caffeine even if they didn’t know about caffeine itself. There was, for example, a French Jesuit named Alexandre de Rhodes in the mid-17th century who very quickly realised that tea had the ability to suppress sleep. He was a missionary in Asia and he was interested in experimenting with tea.

His idea was that if he could suppress sleep completely, he would be able to get twice as much done because he wouldn’t be sleeping.

“He reported that in one case he was able to stay awake for a whole week, skipping like six or seven nights. Then, he realised it was impossible to drink tea to keep himself continually awake.

He settled on a regime where he skipped one night a week by drinking tea to be able to increase his activities as a missionary.”

You mentioned in other interviews that do this kind of work, one of the things which is crucial is a command of certain languages (Latin certainly). But what about the process itself? Is it a big detective story where you start with a single thread that widens and then takes you around different archives all over?

“Well you are partially right and partially wrong. It is a great detective story and I like the history of medicine very much. You are right that an understanding of the necessary languages is needed.

“When students ask me what I do, I tell them my work resembles that of the fictional religious iconologist Robert Langdon from The Da Vinci Code.

“I read a lot of books from the 16th and 17th centuries. What is fascinating is that we have books in the treasury room of our institute with around 2,500 volumes, a number of which are about real magic which were written by people who really believed that if they did a certain step or took a series of steps, real magic would be the result.

“But one difference between Langdon and myself is the complete lack of murders in my vicinity. But perhaps that will change...” (laughs)

I should hope not!!

“The only part where you weren’t right is that I don’t have to go to archives as much these days because of how much material was digitised over the last 15 years or so. There are many amazing libraries online now. Because of that, the only other thing you really need is those languages. Once you can read 16th century English, Italian and Latin, you have a plethora of sources to use in your research.”