

A very cool business: new perspectives on the import, production and consumption of wine in the North in Roman and medieval times

A two-day conference organised within the framework of the 'Année de France'

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Abstract

Belgium is a wine drinking country. In recent years, total annual consumption hovered around 270 million litres. This makes Belgium the 12th country worldwide in terms of wine consumption. Traditionally, much of this wine comes from France, with an annual import of 112,5 million litres in 2016. This is not a new trend. The transfer and trade of this highly valued commodity to the more northern parts of Europe is embedded within a centuries-old and lasting economic and cultural relationship between France and its neighbouring regions. At least since Roman times, French wine has played a fundamental role in the consumption patterns displayed by various social groups within the Low Countries. During the Middle Ages, this relationship only became stronger, as the harbour town of Damme became the most important North-European hub in the maritime trade of wine, mostly from Gasconne. Archaeological and historical data for these periods demonstrate how wine remained a crucial part of trade and exchange networks between foremost southern (French) regions and the north, and how it actively contributed to the construction and the maintenance of socio-cultural identities.

Domestic wine production in Belgium may be low, but high quality wine is experiencing some kind of a revival because of increasingly favourable climatic circumstances. There is once again a historical parallel, as the French also expanded their wine-making techniques and traditions to the more northern regions of Europe on several occasions: the Belgian wine industry shortly flourished in the warmer Roman era, and later again in the warmer High Medieval period. On both occasions, climatic and economic pressure eventually caused the business to collapse.

We believe that the time is riper than ever to illuminate this two-millennia old relationship between the south in the north in an interdisciplinary scientific way. Recent advances in multi-disciplinary methodologies involving archaeology, history and chemistry now allow for diachronically exploring the production, trade and consumption of wine in northern Europe in more detail. The 'Année de la France' event at Ghent University – which stresses and stimulates the scientific collaboration with France in and outside the academic world – will provide an ideal opportunity to start addressing these issues within an international framework.

Therefore, with this two-day workshop, we would like to explore comparative and interdisciplinary approaches for analysing existing and alternative models of 'wine history' from the eldest attested Roman imports to the later Middle Ages, and even to modern-day practices. Our focus is fourfold: historical and cultural traditions (1), the economic trade and consumption (2), viti- and vinicultural techniques and procedures (3), and the bioarchaeology of grapes and wine grape phenology (4). We warmly invite speakers to submit a proposal about one (or several) of these topics.