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‘Regional specialisation and international trade: The case of wax in Europe, 15th-16th centuries’

Wax was a staple commodity in Christian societies, filling the ships of trading fleets and yielding great profits for the merchants involved, but has suffered from a lack of historiographical attention. This paper, drawing upon archival research undertaken across northern and southern Europe for the project ‘Bees in the Medieval World’, sheds new light on the wax trade and its importance in contemporary commerce and international trade.

In pre-modern Christian societies, beeswax had various uses, either in industrial processes or in the production of candles lit during the religious liturgy. Although hindered by political conflicts that affected commercial contacts or by climatic conditions that underscored bee harvesting, vast quantities of wax were regularly exported from the huge wax-producing regions in Russia and the Maghreb to the centres of consumption and distribution in western Europe

This paper will deal with the provision of wax to northern Europe and the north-western Mediterranean during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. We will describe the main supply routes, generally by sea, that connected regions where the product was underused (due to religious or demographic circumstances) with others where demand for the product was significant. Populations in the two main zones of production—the forests of Russia and the Maghrebi coast—devoted great effort to the care of bees and the production of wax, while merchant companies in Christian Europe bought and sold this wax on a vast scale, overcoming a series of logistical, political, legal and even ethical hurdles, in the process.

The paper will furthermore assess the volume and the variations in the wax supply during this period. Handling data derived from a wide array of fiscal and private sources of both regions, this paper will show how examination of a single commodity can shed light on environmental change and political complications, and how local markets dealt with bottlenecks, scarcity, and uneven supply in the turbulent later middle ages.