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‘Religious devotion and pious consumption: Wax in late medieval and early modern Europe, 15th-16th centuries’

Wax was an essential component in the celebration of the Christian liturgy and was therefore in significant demand across Christendom and its dense network of ecclesiastical institutions. This paper draws upon a series of case studies focused on the unpublished financial materials of cathedrals in Bruges, Barcelona, Mallorca, and Bamberg, to illuminate the scale of the consumption in beeswax, its economic cost, and some of the mechanisms underpinning its utilisation and distribution.

A systematic and comparative assessment of the detailed cathedral accounts across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries underlines the often staggering quantities of wax consumed by ecclesiastical institutions—Saint Donatian’s in Bruges, for example, burnt through over 1000 kilos per annum in some years—and attest to the significant investment in belief necessitated by the cultural practices and religious devotion encouraged by Latin Christianity. The cathedral accounts, however, do far more than just record the quantities of wax purchased and burnt in the service of worship, but shed light on how the valuable apiary product was manufactured, consumed, sold on, and sometimes re-used or returned to local chandlers. The references to canons and often anonymous women selling candles in the cloisters and nave to visiting laity point to a vibrant micro-economy in wax products drawing in all levels of society, and the differing provision of candles and torches by the cathedrals’ officers for both routine feasts and special occasions reflects the regional nuances in the liturgical calendar that developed in different regions of Christendom. Analysis of fluctuations of wax prices at the point of consumption points, furthermore, to the vulnerability of bee products in an era marked by political instability, environmental change, and, beginning in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, the religious divisions sparked by the reformation.

Comparing the consumption of wax in a series of cathedrals underlines the source of the hunger that drove the large-scale international trade in the apiary product, while highlighting the ubiquity of wax in the cultural and religious worlds of medieval and early modern Christians and the financial costs involved in servicing the almost insatiable demand for the product.