

Artificial pastures and tithes in Normandy (17th-18th centuries)

Paper for the panel “Innovation and change in European agriculture via the spread of new crops from the 16th to the 19th century” (first draft)
(Rural History Conference – Bern 19-22 August 2013).

Although Normandy is known for its permanent pastures (which expanded during the 17th and 18th centuries), certain areas also saw the spread of artificial pastures (sainfoin, clover, alfalfa).

I tried to study this spread, collecting as many conflicts as possible surrounding their tithes. The kind of documents I mainly used were judiciary archives. Besides, in the decisions of the courts ("vicomtés", "bailliages", "Parlement de Rouen"), we have found some references to previous conflicts, which helped to enlarge the corpus. Before the trial, each part very often used to write their arguments in a document called "factum", which were sometimes printed. Two of them exceed a hundred pages! From time to time, some agreements were signed before any trial. Finally, these conflicts entailed a lot of debates we can find in numerous commentaries of the Norman custom, published in the 17th and the 18th centuries.

I found only 4 conflicts surrounding alfalfa but 6 about sainfoin and 15 about clovers. If straight away it is indeed tempting to study the chronology of the conflicts which were found, to draw a map about them and to define the sociology of the people concerned, what do the results really mean?

Several difficulties have to be solved before trying to conclude on the spread of artificial pastures. First of all, I have only a part of the conflicts: it is impossible for a single man to explore all the judiciary archives. Secondly, what are the origins of the conflicts? Not only is it the appearance of a new plant, it also deals with the economy and the society in which these new plants appeared. Where were these plants growing (gardens, fields)? What were the laws about the collection of tithes on new plants in Normandy and were they modified during this period? How were the relationships between the peasants, the landowners and the Church in Normandy and in which way did they affect the chronology and the geography of the conflicts? What was the impact of a conflict in the nearby parishes or in the rest of Normandy?

Nevertheless, this method can be useful. To my mind, it can help make the chronology of the spread more precise, at least, for its beginning. The debates provide numerous pieces of information about the way these new plants were considered or used. The geography of the conflicts I have found, compared with the different patterns of agriculture and landscapes presents some logical links. The conflicts surrounding sainfoin are for example located in the central part of Normandy, in a wide grain-growing plain between Caen and Argentan. The Bessin (near Bayeux and Isigny) or the Pays d'Auge presents very few conflicts about these crops but in these regions the permanent pastures are in dominant position. The Seine valley and the coastline seem to be more concerned and so the study also has to consider the commercial ways and the transports. At last, the peasants and the landowners who refused to pay the tithes can be separated in two groups. Some of them seemed to be some rich peasants, who had to protect their individual interest. The others, in West-Normandy (Cotentin, Avranches bay) were some communities who fought together, specially about the clover tithes. These differences reveal some different ways of using these new crops and provide a new sight, complementary to agronomic literature.

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