

9.3.2. The More Information – the More Expertise? Collecting, Evaluating, and Implementing Advanced Agrarian Knowledge in the Electoral Palatinate, c. 1776-1800

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Using the example of the reign of Karl Theodor, Elector Palatine (1724-1799), the paper will discuss the conditions, opportunities, and also constraints of governmental initiative to improve agrarian practice. From 1776 onwards, improving the quality of tobacco grown in the Palatinate became an important project for the electoral government, as there was no more American tobacco available due to the War of Independence. Thus, good profit seemed to be possible. Sources about the outcome of the project are scarce, but archival documents allow retracing important steps of the communication of concepts and concrete measures, but also objections to certain stages of the initiative.

Collecting valid information about the most promising concepts to meliorate Palatinate tobacco – grown there since the 17th century – turned out to be the first challenge for the electoral government. This meant to gather data in a rather wide geographical frame, not only in the Palatinate, but also about tobacco farming in the Netherlands or in America, and to gather data from quite disparate sources and of very different types (e.g. descriptions of various techniques of tobacco farming abroad, but also information about the trend of tobacco prices paid for certain quality grades or about the climate and soil in the different parts of the territory).

Preconceived (and sometimes quite diverse) opinions on the individual efforts, responsibilities and aims of the project shaped the communication between the government, office holders in the districts and peasant farmers from the beginning and influenced the evaluation of the information transferred. Being highly dependent on the expertise of others, the government received memoranda blaming peasant farmers in a rather general verdict for storing the tobacco harvest in a neglectful way or even for deliberate cheating, pointing out the positive effects of more control by local clerks. On the other hand, district office holders, called on to comment these memoranda with the help of village mayors, indicated the limitation of tobacco quality by weather conditions, soil, storage facilities, and thus offered an explanation for low qualities requiring more complex solutions. Likewise, new concepts of tobacco farming were also judged quite differently. Besides, techniques of collecting statistic information about farming in the Palatinate were at an initial stage in the 1770s – this fact did not facilitate the gathering and the evaluation of valid data about agricultural capacities.

Given these circumstances, decision making turned out to be a difficult task. Obviously, the elector and his counsellors tried a twofold strategy, offering different ways of

augmenting tobacco quality and trying to continue the communication process with the farmers: An order, given by the elector in 1777, underlined the importance of handling the harvest carefully and of intensive control by the local authorities, interpretable as suspicion against the farmers' intentions and know-how; at the same time, the elector initiated local expert groups for rating soil, seed, sowing and storage according to advanced principles of farming, acting on-site. Information exchange was not to be replaced completely by one-way communication with this order: The government engaged in distributing advice for tobacco farming from abroad, collected by government officials, calling on the village mayors to evaluate the proposed measures, eventually underlining the farmers' expertise and the value of their knowledge. History of communication in a methodological point of view is densely intertwined with notions of a history of knowledge here.

For the government, all these measures meant an effort at low risk, leaving the responsibility on the side of the usually badly paid local officers and the peasant farmers. Coeval sources actually indicate an increase of Palatinate tobacco farming in the last quarter of the 18th century; the roots of this increase, however, do not seem to be sure – in 1780 and 1789, new orders were prepared, repeating measures similar to those of 1777 and one more time strengthening notions of control.

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