CHAPTER TEN

FISH FOR FEAST AND FAST
FISH CONSUMPTION IN THE NETHERLANDS
IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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Introduction

In medieval Europe, fish was an important meat substitute. The consumption of fish had special cultural significance. Due to its natural qualities and cultural connotations, fish was well-suited to the pursuit of voluntary asceticism and concentration on spiritual matters during the many fast days prescribed by the Christian Church.

The view of asceticism was apparently dependent on status. The cultural historian Massimo Montanari describes, on the basis of Italian city chronicles, prestigious wedding feasts held during Lent at the end of the fourteenth century. Large, expensive fish were served in sumptuous, richly spiced sauces. On further consideration, it is not surprising that certain types of fish ranked as 'feast fish'. According to Richard Hoffmann, environmental historian and an expert on the medieval fishery, fresh fish, and especially large-sized fish (pike, large trouts, zander) and anadromous fish (salmon, sturgeon), were considered, certainly until 1300, food for the elite in the greater part of Europe. This was because only a few areas were situated directly on well-stocked waters. It was not until the late Middle Ages, with the expansion of long-distance trade in preserved fish and the rise of fish culture, that there was any change in this situation.¹ The great consumption of fish in periods of fasting does not exclude the possibility that fish was also eaten outside those periods, even before fast days had been established by the Church. More information has been made available about early medieval fish consumption of the (as yet unchristianized) Slavic peoples in the north.

¹ I like to thank Richard Hoffmann and the editors of this volume for their valuable comments. Translation from the Dutch by Stacey Knecht. Montanari (1994) 86; Hoffmann (2001) 131–166; for fish culture in the southern Netherlands see chapter nine in this volume.
of Eastern Europe. It shows that religious rules were not necessary to make people eat fish.\(^2\) New research also provides us with a better explanation for the expansion of the herring trade. Written and archeological sources indicate that it was not the consumption of meat restricted by the Church, but the growth of cities and populations, which form the most important explanation for the increase in the demand for fish. This led to an increase in the fish supply, and especially preserved fish such as pickled herring.\(^3\)

Another point of consideration is: to what extent was fish consumption influenced by ecological factors? Could a large supply of fish also have determined interpretation of the fasting rules? What was the pattern of fish consumption in a coastal region like the Netherlands, where there was an abundance of fish, both freshwater and salt water? The English socio-economical historian A.R. Michell believes that salt water fish was the only accessible source of protein for the masses, especially in the coastal regions. In the Netherlands, there was a great wealth of variety. One can assume that there were large differences in the appreciation of various types of fish, and that this also involved social differences in consumption.

The Dutch fishery historian Y. Ypma notes that current notions of taste and edibility of certain types of fish are of little or no use in determining their commercial value in the past. Tiny freshwater fish, such as ruff, which, in the mid-twentieth century were rarely used for human consumption, were popular food in the Early Modern period. Salmon and sturgeon, on the other hand, also ranked among the more prestigious varieties of fish in the late Middle Ages, if only because of their increasing scarcity. Seal, porpoise, and swordfish were also highly valued ‘fish’.\(^4\) In this article, I will discuss both the cultural and ecological factors pertaining to fish consumption and, wherever possible, the economic aspects. The main question is: who ate what? This raises an important sub-question: to what extent did the availability of certain fish in certain ecosystems determine the social status of the fish on the table? Was rare fish ‘luxury fish’? Another question is: how did access to certain ecosystems—inland waterways versus the sea, and the coast versus the interior—influence regional differences in fish consumption?

\(^2\) Benecke (1987) 238.
\(^3\) Lampen (2000) 60–64.