Aline Durand (ed.)


The collective book here presented, the eighth of the Cahier d’Histoire des Techniques Collection published by the University of Provence, encompasses a very long period of the history of technology, examined in the framework of ethnological studies, from antiquity to the twentieth century.

The curator of the volume, Aline Durand, explains how the concept of tools, as found in the modern dictionary, was defined in very close relation to the mechanical arts by establishing a strong link with the dimension of the task, completely obscuring the social and cultural processes prior to its invention. Referring Georges Comet’s studies, Durand claims that technical tools must be seen as repositories of historical technical meaning, as well as constituting a history of the material conditions of human communities in which tools are produced. From this perspective, a technical device has to be considered not just an expression of a single relationship between man and nature, but as evidence of human relationships without which we can not have a full understanding of its meaning. For the curator, only by studying a technical device in the context of ethnological sources is it possible to outline the sequence of technical gestures and the operating procedures in the professional context of a tool.

The present volume calls our attention to the important role of the agricultural instrument in the history of society, from antiquity to the modern era. The agricultural instruments presented not just as “simple” technical devices but also as witnesses and preservers of the material culture of the society that manufactured and used them. Tools, machines and technical processes are first and foremost important archaeological finds because of their anthropological and social meaning.

The first essay by Carolina Carpinschi (Le dépiquage au rouleau: un regard sur deux cents ans d’histoire en France de 1804 à 2004) traces the history of the threshing roller from its introduction in France until its demise in the nineteenth century. The author points out that this basic pre-machine society agricultural tool could subsequently be seen in museums emphasizes its important social and ethnological value in human history. In the second contribution, by Noël Coulet (La forge comunale en Bassa Provence occidentale au XVe siècle: deux documents inédits) transcribes and publishes two agreements made by two municipalities of Provence (Puy Sainte-Reparate, 1430; Pourrières 1457)
for the management of the public forge. From the agreements emerges curious information on the organization of the blacksmith's workshop and the important social role played by this art in late medieval rural societies. With the third contribution, Jean Domenichino (Quand les prolos jouaient au Mécano: techniques dans la construction navale provençale jusqu’aux années 1960), focuses on the 1960s, presenting the complex technical processes in the naval arsenal, retracing all the essential steps for the design and construction of a ship in the offices and construction sites of Provence (Port-de-Bouc, Marseille, CAP, Unité de la Mandrague).

Gaetano Forni (Outils agricoles, cycle géoboioanthropologique, archétypes, mythes, histoire, musées: quelles corrélations?) presents an essay dedicated to agrarian museology, showing how ethnological museums play a role that goes beyond the maintenance of memory, thus assuming an important role in the conservation and management of territory. In particular, it addresses the issue of erroneous conceptions of the man / agriculture / environment relationship in examining the puzzling case of the “demonization of CO2,” on which important political and economic choices and all life processes depend. The essay by José Antonio González Alcantud (L’introduction de la batteuse et les réflexions intellectuelles qu’elle suscita dans une ville agraire d’Andalousie orientale dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle) analyses the slow introduction of mechanized threshing in the Spanish region of Andalusia. Alcantud stresses how the backwardness of agricultural techniques in this region were the result of choices made in a debate between agronomists. Michel Paulin, Michel Colardelle, and Éric Verdel's very interesting and audacious contribution (Essai d’interprétation d’un graffito médiéval: un croquis de chantier de l’habitat fortifié de Charavines?) explains a series of signs engraved on a tile found in the archaeological site of Colletière (early eleventh century). The authors read the signs as operative sketches made by a master mason in a worksite to illustrate an operational phase of the project. It is an extremely rare if not unique document and its interpretation, even though hypothetical, helps to shed light on the mode of technical notion transmission in medieval worksites, for which we do not have any sources.

The essay by Sandra Poëzevara (Les transferts de technologie des industries traditionnelles aux industries nouvelles du milieu du XIXe siècle au milieu du XXe siècle) focuses on the conversion of various industrial areas of the village of Rustrel (Haute Provence) which from the mid- nineteenth century until the second half of the twentieth were the object of several industrial, military, mining, agriculture, and tourism transformations. The author examines several cases, such as the conversion of pigment ocher mines into cultivations of champignon. The reduction of rock mining with fire is the theme