

Book Review

Beer in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

by **Richard W. Unger**

Pp.xvi + 319. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. £27.00.

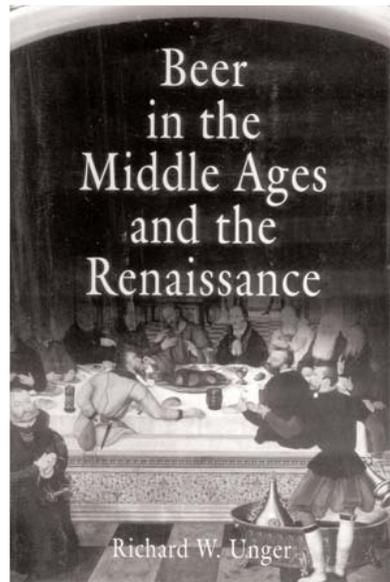
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This is Richard Unger's second major work on the brewing industry, following on from his *A History of Brewing in Holland, 900 - 1900 Economy, Technology and the State* published in 2001. From concentrating upon the trade in one country he expands his area of study to encompass much of northern Europe during the medieval and Renaissance periods.

Unger begins by asserting that 'the mention of the history of beer always brings a laugh or at the very least a snicker. The history of beer for most people is not a serious topic of study. It seems to them a frivolous and hardly worth more than a few diverting minutes of anyone's time'. This, he believes, is a view based on ignorance, the inability of many living in the early twenty-first century to comprehend the ubiquity of beer in the past - a drink consumed by just about all sections of society, irrespective of age or social status, and all times of the day. Yet, Unger argues, it is due to this very pervasiveness that to write beer's history soon

expands to become a general history. To avoid this danger he restricts himself, aiming to produce a study that is 'primarily descriptive and to a limited degree analytical. It establishes some categories which isolate features of the organization of brewing as well as significant and influential technical advances. It also discerns and offers some overarching patterns in the development of beer making ...'.

To help understand the evolution of brewing over this long period Unger employs a hierarchy of modes of production, beginning with household brewing for domestic



consumption and culminating in the manufactory. This framework allows him to discuss in detail brewings' rise to become a major European industry and the beginnings of its decline (before resurging again at the end of the nineteenth century). Along the way he discusses a number of related transformations: the move from brewing being a predominantly female enterprise to one run almost solely by men; the centralization and urbanization of the trade; the increasing importance of exportation; the rise of government interference (both negative - tax and regulation - and positive - protectionism); and, most important of all, the introduction of hops with its numerous implications. The

whole enterprise is underpinned by a large and impressive range of statistics.

One fascinating point to emerge from Unger's study is the European nature of the brewing industry, even at the beginning of the Middle Ages it was a truly international business.

At one point Professor Unger expresses the hope that 'if the book serves in any way as a guide to the future work on beer making and drinking, and given past experience there will be a good deal of future work on these topics, then it will have served its purpose' - he shouldn't worry.