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The Mediterranean and Ancient History

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1. Introduction

Historians, and probably anthropologists too, are destined to write a great deal more about both the Mediterranean and Mediterraneanism—the doctrine that there are distinctive characteristics which the cultures of the Mediterranean have, or have had, in common. And whatever the importance of the Mediterranean may be for earlier or later history, those of us who study the history of the Greeks and Romans have a particular need, for obvious reasons, to get the subject straight.

With practised one-upmanship, one of those most responsible for opening up the debate about Mediterraneanism, my friend Michael Herzfeld, has implied (in his contribution to this volume) that it is now *vieux jeu*, an unexciting leftover (if not hangover) from the 1980s and 1990s.1 In other words, concen-

1 According to the anthropologists V. A. Goddard, J. R. Llobera, and C. Shore, 'Introduction: The Anthropology of Europe', in Goddard, Llobera, and Shore (eds.), The Anthropology of Europe (Oxford and Providence, RI: 1994), 1-40: 4, 'the Mediterranean' was invented in 1959, and had already outlived its usefulness in the 1980s (pp. 20–3). But there was a touch of wishful thinking when J. De Pina-Cabral wrote in an important article in 1989 that there was 'an increasing awareness of something is wrong with the notion of the Mediterranean as a culture area' ('The Mediterranean as a Category of Regional Comparison: A Critical View', Current Anthropology 30 (1989), 399–406: 399). In reality, the Mediterranean is a concept with a long and somewhat shady modern history; see, for example, G. Sergi, *La decadenza delle nazioni* latine (Turin, 1900). For a balanced assessment of 'culture areas' in general see R. Lederman, 'Globalization and the Future of Culture Areas', Annual Review of Anthropology 27 (1998), 427–49. This introduction aims to set out a positive programme, and to criticize certain general intellectual trends. Criticism of CS is incidental. It may in any case not be very opportune, since Horden and Purcell promise a second volume in which they will consider
trating on the Mediterranean may not only be a romantic delusion or a piece of Eurocentric cultural imperialism—thoughts which we have grown rather accustomed to—it may, worse still, be a recipe for boredom. The other side of that coin is presented by Susan Alcock in her revealing survey of ‘Mediterranean’ periodicals: there are more and more players. Thousands, no doubt, receive the electronic information service H-Mediterra-
ean. Something of an illusion is involved, however, for while there has been a wave of important new work on the ancient Mediterranean environment in recent years—and a lot of thought about what the term ‘Mediterranean’ denotes—it has scarcely been a wave of tidal proportions, and much of what is being published in ‘Mediterranean’ journals is in fact old-fash-
ioned local history, archaeology, or antiquarianism of little general significance. And ‘Mediterranean’ has often been a synonym for ‘Greek and Roman, plus such other ancient cultures as I may happen to pay attention to’. Yet as far as ancient historians are concerned, there are still important Mediterra-
nean questions to answer—some of them arguably quite crucial for the understanding of the ancient world.

There is admittedly something a little old-fashioned about almost all recent writing about the ancient Mediterranean. The modern scholar gazes upon that world with scientific detachment, all the more self-confident because he/she is often borrowing from the notoriously objective natural sciences. This volume breaks away from that tradition to some extent, and subjects the observer to some observation from time to time.

What I mainly plan to discuss in this chapter are two very difficult questions that can be framed quite simply. How should the history of the ancient Mediterranean be written—if it should be written at all? And is Mediterraneanism of much use to ancient historians, or is it alternatively something of a danger (and in effect a cousin of Orientalism)?

climate, disease, demography, and relations with the outside world (p. 4). Debate must continue, however.

2 The new journal Ancient West and East (2002) might be thought to point in the opposite direction, since it wishes to reinsert the periphery—but that implicitly keeps the Mediterranean at the centre.

3 I have not been able to trace this distinction beyond J. Beckert’s comment in Current Anthropology 20 (1979), 85. Shortly after CS there appeared A. T. Grove and O. Rackham, The Nature of Mediterranean Europe: An Ecological History (New Haven and London, 2001).


5 All this: Les Mémoires 17. Not that one should doubt the depth of Braudel’s knowledge of ancient history (at the Sorbonne his teachers had included Maurice Holleaux: Braudel, MMW, i. 22 n. 1).
ject is the ‘human history of the Mediterranean Sea and its coastlands’ during roughly three millennia, to AD 1000.\(^6\) Thus the period is vastly longer, although as we shall see, the subject-matter is more circumscribed; in particular, it is important to notice that most of the central questions of economic history are not being addressed. Fair enough. But a perilous element of vagueness in the authors’ programme is summed up in the word ‘coastlands’, and indeed *The Corrupting Sea* does not concern itself only with what can easily be called coastlands. Hinterlands and inland mountains are often, understandably, in the foreground. So we immediately recognize that there is a problem of delimitation, a problem accentuated by the fact that the human history of the Mediterranean in these 3,000 years was often intimately linked to power centres far away from the coastlands, in Mesopotamia, for example, or up the Nile.

Horden and Purcell declare their intention of establishing the ‘unity and distinctiveness’ of the ancient–medieval Mediterranean world. On a cultural plane, this is a hard question indeed, to which we shall return (Sections 3 and 6), offering in the end some limited assent but of a possibly unwelcome kind. On the ecological plane, matters seem rather simpler. The Mediterranean is, obviously, a construct, but it is a construct with something of a natural basis. The region is the historic home of *vitis vinifera* and *olea europaea*, and the exploitation of the vine and the olive-tree seems to provide both unity and distinctiveness. There is a unified climatic zone, and in addition relatively easy navigability: the famous obsidian of Melos was already being fetched to the mainland in the palaeolithic (eleventh millennium BC?), so it is believed;\(^7\) deep-hulled sailing ships from Egypt sailed up the Levantine coast in the mid-third millennium,\(^8\) and in the second millennium such ships began to cross the open sea, where the mariner could not see land—hence spasmodically increasing medium-distance and eventually long-distance exchange of commodities (and of course the exchange of cultural influences). The very uneven distribution of resources, especially metal resources, greatly encouraged a system of long-distance exchange. Much later, in the era of the Arab conquests, when to a superficial gaze the Mediterranean became more of a frontier than a unity and new non-maritime capitals became important, the natural basis at least remained much the same.

Quite how strong an ecological construction this is we shall consider in Section 3. And whether the Mediterranean world can really be said to have had a natural barrier to its east during antiquity is an awkward question. Given the quantity of interaction with Mesopotamia, with Arabia and with the Indian Ocean over the millennia, the answer may well be more ‘no’ than ‘yes’. Horden and Purcell meanwhile maintain that there were ‘intrinsically Mediterranean factors in the history of primary production’,\(^9\) we shall want to identify them and evaluate them.

Bloch once warned: ‘l’unité de lieu n’est que désordre. Seul l’unité de problème fait centre’.\(^10\) For a historian, the unity of the place can only be a preliminary. All sorts of interesting books have been written more or less about the Mediterranean and its coastlands as a place, but how often have they been history books? What we can imagine—and what it would have been difficult to imagine, say, seventy years ago—is a history of the Mediterranean world which would essentially be a history of the interaction of that environment and the human beings within it. Here we can return to the scholastic-sounding distinction between history of and history in. Horden and Purcell distinguish between their own subject and what is put forward in part 1 of the *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World* (‘The Role of the Environment’) by proclaiming their allegiance to ‘microecologies’ (due for some further definition), though they agree that this will bring in, in a subordinate way, ‘political, social, economic, religious’ history, which according to them is history in.\(^11\)

\(^6\) *CS* 9.
\(^8\) Broodbank, 96 (the whole chapter is important).
\(^9\) *CS* 176.
\(^10\) In a review, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* 6 (1934), 81–5: 81.
\(^11\) *CS* 2.
The line between human intervention (admissible, according to The Corrupting Sea as part of history of) and history in (inadmissible) is next-to-impossible to maintain. Think of a concrete example of a humanly generated ecological change—say Roman hydraulic engineering in the plain of the Po—and it seems obvious that the phenomenon cannot be discussed intelligently in isolation from its economic and its social and probably its political history. It is an important achievement of Horden and Purcell to have put the physical environment at the centre of their analysis, but we assume that it is not their ambition to be geologists or oceanographers.

Would it, incidentally, be possible to write a satisfying history of pre-modern man’s interaction with the environment in other more-or-less self-contained seas within the Mediterranean or nearby? Why not? There is certainly no shortage of environmentally interesting facts and theories about, say, the Aegean or the Tyrhenian Seas. And now that a more strictly environmental history has come into being, there is no reason not to write about the history of any number of smaller stretches of water. Indeed, there is a terrific advantage: you can be thorough. The suspicion returns that the Mediterranean as a whole has a more powerful attraction as a subject partly for a reason that is only remotely related to environmental history: it has simply been the scene of several of the principal power conflicts of Western history, Greeks against Persians, Romans against Carthaginians (and everyone else), Christians against Muslims. Even Braudel found the contingent hard to resist, and in The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World he of course provided a part 3 on events (‘Events, Politics and People’), including a fifty-page chapter on the Battle of Lepanto (mainly about diplomacy, presumably reflecting the earliest phase of his research).

Horden and Purcell write (464–5) that they have tried to show how their ‘microecological approach can be brought into relation with the “textbook” ingredients of political, social, religious and economic narrative [sic]’, but few readers, one suspects, will have noticed this. It can be assumed that they do not think that ‘all analyses of culture and social relations dissolve into an all-embracing ecology’ (R. Ellen’s way of describing an error which environmental anthropology should avoid, Environment, Subsistence and System: The Ecology of Small-scale Formations (Cambridge, 1982), p. xi).
For years now scholars have been discovering Mediterra-
eans in other parts of the world. Later in this volume David
Abulafia’s paper, a notable tour de force, surveys this literature.
It should warn us that fragmentation and diversity are to be
expected in a region of such a size, whether it is the South China
Sea or the Caribbean. The real Mediterranean region is not
surprisingly rather variegated in some respects, but that should
earn it special historiographical respect (‘La Toscana è . . . una
regione fondata sulle diversità’, says my guide-book,
not blushing at the cliche). Connectedness—‘connectivity’ in
the electronic patois of The Corrupting Sea—is a very different
matter, and the factors that have brought it into being, or
inhibited it, in any particular case, are a fascinating, we might
say urgent, question.

Another thing the environmental historian cannot skimp on is
time. The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World con-
stantly struggles to express the relationship between the author’s
three levels of time, in particular between those that have the
clear identity, the longue durée and the time of contingent
events. The Corrupting Sea bravely assumes responsibility for
a good long period—though in the end the Bronze Age is much
neglected. It requires quite unusual scholars to manage even
two thousand years, let alone three or four. Unfortunately it is
hardly possible to argue about pre-modern ecology with any
more restricted horizon. By 2000 BC the vine and the olive-
tree had already been domesticated. (From a prehistoric archae-
ologist’s point of view, the proposed time-limits will still not
seem very impressive: 20,000 years is a normal horizon, and
the earliest firmly dated human settlement in Europe, Isernia
La Pineta, used to be located circa 750,000 BP, when rhinoceroses
and elephants roamed in Molise). Not that the matter is at all
simple, since it was only in Mycenaean times that the western
Mediterranean, or part of it, began to have contacts with the
east, and well into the first millennium BC there were plenty of
western areas which, like the Biferno Valley, seem to have been
untouched by people or cultigens from further east.

It is admittedly a reasonable strategy for any historian of pre-
industrial times to argue that little if anything changed from one
century to the next, all the more so if the focus is on demog-
raphy, subsistence agriculture, pastoralism, the environment—
rather less so, fairly obviously, if the focus is on, say, exchange,
migration, acculturation, mentalités, or power. But the case for
immobility has to be argued—and the changes that did occur
need to be measured. Immobility can be so relative. The
changes in the Mediterranean economy and in Mediterranean
navigation between 400 BC and 100 BC were slow if compared to
those that have taken place in the last 300 years, but rapid
indeed by the overall standards of the millennia we are now
considering.

The sheer length of the time which a historian of the Medi-
terranean is more or less constrained to consider will probably
be an enduring obstacle. Van De Microp’s chapter in this book
is particularly welcome because it makes us think about the
kinds of people who inhabited the eastern shores of the Medi-
terranean c.1500 BC. His paper may also help to inculcate us
against historical generalizations about this region based on
Italy and Greece, two fragments of a vastly larger whole.

The question about immobility and change in antiquity is,
onece the terms have been defined, fundamentally one of degree.
But that puts us in a difficult, not to say desperate position,
because almost nothing to do with the environmental history of
the ancient Mediterranean world can be measured. ‘All is mut-
bility’, say Horden and Purcell. Fair enough; but they do not
offer us any ways of measuring or evaluating ecological or
economic change. Here is one of the frontiers of our subject:
shall we ever, for example, be able to measure the pace of that
controversial but probably crucial process, deforestation, in the

17 Even the Minoans and Mycenaeans receive much less attention than
might have been expected, not to mention the other (majority) inhabitants of
the coastal Mediterranean in the second millennium BC.
18 My dream is that one day doctoral candidates in American history will be
required to take an exam on the longue durée.
19 Criticism of The Corrupting Sea, on a variety of grounds, for not embrac-
20 G. Barker, with R. Hodges and G. Clark, A Mediterranean Valley:
Landscape Archaeology and Annales History in the Biferno Valley (Leicester,
1995), 85–7. I have been told that there is now a still earlier site.
21 CS 464.
ancient Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{22} It was certainly not a process that advanced at an even steady speed in all periods.

Then there is the question of immobility between the end of antiquity, or alternatively the Middle Ages, and the ethnographic present. The temptation to identify the past and the (pseudo-)present, or rather to find the former in the latter, has often proved irresistible. It is enshrined at least one of the great works of twentieth-century literature—Cristo si è fermato a Eboli. There he (or she) is—homo Mediterraneus, patient, tough, fantastically superstitious, clannish, full of hatred for his/her neighbours, unchanging. Is it a true portrait, or merely a convincing one? Of course Carlo Levi never pretended, unlike some of those who have quoted him, that the ecology or economy of ‘Gagliano’ was really untouched by the outside world: indeed one of the chief sufferings of the Gagliano peasants consisted of a stupid new tax on goats thought up far way in Rome. And the most important social fact about Lucania at that time was quite massive male emigration to other continents.\textsuperscript{23}

We shall return later (Section 6) to the more general question how ancient historians should use ethnographic evidence. The Corrupting Sea attempts to reach a balanced assessment of what should be done with Mediterranean ethnography: its authors raise the hope that ‘a judicious combination of anthropology and nineteenth-century history might take us back to just before the unexamined tumult of “modernization” began’.\textsuperscript{24} They appear to hope that by getting back to say AD 1800, they will virtually have arrived at their ancient/medieval period, a view they rightly qualify as ‘optimistic’.\textsuperscript{25} They quote with approval the following from Bloch.\textsuperscript{26}

But in the film which he [the historian] is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behoves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken.

But to be blunt, this has almost nothing to do with what historians did in Bloch’s time or do now, certainly not ancient historians. And it does not represent Bloch’s own method, though it stems from his much more limited belief that a French historian could learn a vast amount from the French landscape.\textsuperscript{27}

What then are the essential elements in a history of the Mediterranean (to accept, for the sake of discussion, the validity of the off/in distinction)? The following could not properly be omitted, I suggest:

- **Some delimitation of the area in question.** While no canonical definition is possible, there really do have to be some boundaries, for each period; otherwise we shall seem neurotic (there will be no great difficulty, however, in treating peripheral zones as intermediate or transitional). Plato saw, as other Greeks had doubtless seen for many generations before him, that there was a single sea that stretched ‘from the River Phasis [i.e. the land at the far eastern end of the Black Sea] to the Pillars of Hercules’ (*Phaedo* 109ab), which admittedly leaves a great deal indeterminate. The question of delimitation can become in part a question about river valleys or basins, Danube, Rhine, Baetis, Mesopotamia—not to mention the great rivers that actually flow into the Mediterranean—but also about uplands. Where are the places substantially untouched by man’s

\textsuperscript{22} We shall return to this question later, but I must say at once that I lack the scientific knowledge needed to reach an independent conclusion.

\textsuperscript{23} What is really extraordinary is to see this immobility embraced by Braudel, *MMW*, ii. 1239, 1242-43—largely on the basis of Lawrence Durrell and a careless reading of Carlo Levi. For a much better reading of the latter see *CS* 468-70. R. S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri*, *Writing Ancient History* (London, 1995), 70-1, comments well on the importance of resisting the temptation to see the contemporary Egyptian countryside as timeless and unchanging. M. Fotiadis, ‘Modernity and the Past-still-present: Politics of Time in the Birth of Regional Archaeological Projects in Greece’, *American Journal of Archaeology* 99 (1995), 59-78, is essential reading here, but his paper would have benefited from more attention to, precisely, politics.

\textsuperscript{24} *CS* 466-74; the passage quoted: 471.

\textsuperscript{25} *CS* 474.

\textsuperscript{26} The Historian’s Craft, trans. P. Putnam (New York, 1953); original edn.: *Apologie pour l’histoire, ou Métier d’historien* (Paris, 1949), 46, quoted *CS* 461 and approved 484.

\textsuperscript{27} Note the force of ‘first’ in the passage quoted. Earlier in the same paragraph Bloch wrote a counterbalancing sentence: ‘Not, indeed, that there could be any question of imposing this forever-static picture, just as it is, at each stage of the journey upstream to the headwaters of the past.’ But rewinding the film recurs in Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life (Civilization and Capitalism, 1)*, trans. S. Reynolds (London 1979); original edn., *Les Structures du quotidien* (Paris, 1979), 294.
interaction with the Mediterranean environment? And can it really be true that Egypt is ‘outside [the Mediterranean] ecologically’? How indeed would we argue the case for that, one way or the other? The southern border of the Mediterranean world can be the line between ‘the desert and the sown’, but that leaves the Nile valley inside. And in other directions the flora are not so cooperative: should we really, for instance, hang a great deal upon the northern limits of the cultivation of the olive tree? If we neglect this matter of delimitation, we may end up like a recent writer by denying that there was major deforestation under the Roman Empire (a question I do not claim to answer in this essay) on the grounds that almost all the evidence for it comes from such places as ‘the southern Alps’ and ‘some northern parts of modern Greece’ which we might very well on other grounds consider to be part of the Mediterranean world (and in any case they were part of the Roman Empire).

- The natural history, articulated through periods. It would do no harm to set out, for botanically and biologically ignorant historians such as many of us are, what is known to have been domesticated and growable in the whole area; pests, viruses, and bacteria are also highly relevant. We should think not only of foodstuffs but of the three other physical necessities too, fuel, clothing, and shelter. Of course there has been a tremendous amount of science on most of these subjects, and a recent volume about Pompeii marks an important step forward. It would be extraordinarily useful to have Frayn’s Subsistence Farming in Roman Italy writ larger, on a Mediterranean-wide scale, with all the enrichment provided by modern palaeobotany and palaeozoology. It is so easy for historians to assume that things grew only where they grow now—hence the frequent adaptation of Braudel’s map of the northern limits of olive cultivation, in spite of the evidence that, for fairly obvious reasons, it was cultivated further north in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Closely related to all this is of course the question of water. One of the most important achievements of The Corrupting Sea is to formulate an approach to the history of water management and irrigation (with intriguing information about the Orontes), and together with other recent work, this book now begins to give us a clearer idea of ways in which water dictated the limits of ancient and medieval land use and urbanization.

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28 As claimed by CS 397. Not that the authors are consistent: ancient Alexandria is out, but medieval Cairo is in (the ancient Nile makes a brief appearance, 239; and see Map 21). See R. S. Bagnall’s chapter later in this volume. B. D. Shaw, reviewing CS in JRA 14 (2001), observes (p. 444) that Egypt’s ‘whole ecology stands at odds with the authors’ model of the Mediterranean’.

29 Shaw 423.


31 Roman imperial history, it may be added, needs a quite different map, covering not the Mediterranean or that familiar area corresponding to the provinces as they were in the reign of Trajan, but a much wider area where the Roman Empire had economic connections, from Poland to Sri Lanka to Zanzibar.

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- What population burdens could this region carry—in all the circumstances relevant at particular times, such as degrees of afforestation and marshiness, available crops and methods of land management, likely animal populations, availability of meat and fish, known methods of food distribution, food storage and food preparation? This too is an extremely complex question, and one of the most pressing tasks awaiting the environmental historian of the ancient Mediterranean. It has proved difficult to establish prehistoric population sizes on the basis of carrying capacity, and such attempts need to take account of the ‘welfare’ standards of the population in question. Horden and Purcell tell us that estimates of carrying capacity ‘are clearly impossible’, but their own Chapter VI helps to lay some of the foundation for an answer.

The underlying questions concern Malthus’s positive checks, and how ancient populations reacted to them, and further whether there were ‘preventive’ checks, and beyond that again whether there was any possibility in antiquity of sustained economic growth. A merely environmental history cannot be expected to answer such questions in full, but it can be expected to link itself to such other areas of enquiry as the history of migration and colonization—these to be seen not in the classic fashion as the filling of empty spaces but as the occupation of space.

- What did the inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean region think was the identity of the part of the world in which they lived? If human intervention is to have a role in our history of the Mediterranean, we need to know how the coastland inhabitants (at least) regarded it. How they imagined its size, shape and other characteristics, and even how they named it, is of significance. To say that in the Semitic languages the Mediterranean was ‘quite widely’ called ‘the Great Sea’ by 1000 BC, and to imply that this was later the standard Greek term is scarcely to say enough. Some Akkadian documents use such an expression, but it is not likely that they refer to the whole Mediterranean. It is hard to imagine that when the Phoenicians and Greeks were travelling the length of the Mediterranean in the ninth and eighth centuries BC they did not invent names for it. Hecateus, as it happens, is the first Greek known to have called it ‘the great sea’ (FGrH I F26), and he meant something like the whole of it. More interesting, perhaps, is the expression ‘our sea’, he hemetera thalassa (Hecateus F302c), and the variant he kath’ hemas thalassa, ‘the sea in our part of the world’ (Hecateus F18b). Whatever it was called, it was the sea around which we (an undefined we) live, like ants or frogs around a pond, according to the Platonic Socrates (Phaedo 109b). Had all Greeks domesticated the Mediterranean Sea to this extent? As for the Mediterranean world, however, neither Greek nor Latin had a special expression for


38 CS 47. But on the carrying capacity of islands cf. CS 381. Renfrew and Wagstaff (eds.), Island Polity, 145, credibly set the maximum population of Melos in classical times at about 5,000, ‘a ceiling some 40–60% above the levels likely to have been attained in practice’. On the difficulties of calculating carrying capacity see Ellen, Environment, 41–6, R. Sallares, The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World (London, 1991), 73–7, Grove and Rackham, The Nature of Mediterranean Europe, 70–1.

39 It is difficult to see how they will be able to avoid conclusions of some sort, however tentative, when in volume 2 they finally reach the subject of demography.

40 The article of O. A. W. Dülke, ‘Graeco-Roman Perception of the Mediterranean’, in M. Galley and L. Ladjimi Sebai (eds.), L’Homme méditerranéen et la mer (Tunis, 1985), 53–9, does not live up to its title. On the other hand V. Burr, Nostrum Mare. Ursprung und Geschichte der Namen des Mittelmeeres und seiner Teilmee im Altertum (Stuttgart, 1932), is still very useful. He reviewed the ancient names for no fewer than 27 component parts of the Mediterranean as well as for the sea itself.

41 CS 10–11.

42 Burr, Nostrum Mare, 89 n. 50.

43 There is no need to discuss here whether these expressions were really as old as Hecateus. ‘Mediterraneum Mare’ first appears as a name of the sea in Isid., Etym. 13. 16. 1.
it: Greeks could call it the oikoumene but they also used that word for the entire world, which of course they knew to be much larger.\footnote{Rackham, 'Ecology', 33.}

- Did those who lived around the ancient Mediterranean regard it—or their own part of it—as a potential link or a barrier or both at once? What kinds of people were so drawn to the sea that they overcame the fear of pirates and lived by the shore? Who knew the risks and opportunities? Was there a small-islander mentalité? (The questions quickly proliferate). And let our answers not be too Greek; ancient near-eastern texts would need to be constantly in our hands. And what did the illiterate ship-hand think, or the peasant who might or might not migrate, or that favourite of Braudel, also of Horden and Purcell, the coastal trader, the caboteur? These are not wholly impossible questions: after all, we know that Phoenicians and Greeks emigrated in considerable numbers, while others did not, and it is not likely to have been simply a matter of who possessed the necessary maritime technology.

For many Greeks, plainly, the sea was at the centre and proximity to the sea was an essential condition of economic life and of civilized life: you knew that you had reached a different world when on your travels you met men who do not know the sea, and do not eat salt with their food (Od. 11.122–3). Hesiod turns naturally, though diffidently, from the land to the sea (Works and Days 618–94). But how much these attitudes were representative, or duplicated by other Mediterranean populations, is still a subject for investigation.

A phenomenon of the ancient world which expanded and contracted was the long-distance transport of basic commodities such as the Mediterranean triad and metal ores. All concerned had come to regard the practical problems of long-distance commodity transport as manageable ones. We seem to lack any systematic account of how this came about.

- Exploiting the natural environment versus making sensible use of it. Facing the question whether the classical Greeks ‘had an attitude’ towards ecology, Rackham understandably replied ‘I do not know’,\footnote{P. Fedeli, La natura violata: ecologia e mondo romano (Palermo, 1990).} and proceeded to point out the methodological difficulties. For the Roman period, there is at least a competent study by P. Fedeli of ancient notions of what damaged nature.\footnote{D. C. Braund, ‘Piracy under the Principate and the Ideology of Imperial Eradication’, in J. Rich and G. Shipley (eds.), War and Society in the Roman World (London, 1993), 195–212, argues cogently that even under the Roman emperors piracy went on largely unabated.} But the main question to start from, I suppose, is how people treated the natural world when the available technology provided them with choices, or seemed to do so. It is hardly surprising that the inhabitants of the Roman Empire cut down immense numbers of trees (the effects are hotly disputed), but it is surprising to a certain degree that the government of Tiberius once planned to make the River Chiana flow northwards into the Arno instead of southwards into the Tiber, in order to lessen flooding in the capital (Tac. Ann. i. 79, etc.). Ambitious hydraulic engineering, often in the service of a city, is a constant theme.

- Which elements in the natural environment brought into being systems of plunder and exchange over distance? And what happened when such systems weakened, when piracy was reduced (if it ever really was for any extended period),\footnote{See for instance N. H. Gale (ed.), Bronze Age Trade in the Mediterranean (Jons, 1991), E. H. Cline, Sailing the Wine-dark Sea: International Trade and the Late Bronze Age Aegean (Oxford, 1994).} and when long-distance trade slowed down? Bronze-Age trade in the Mediterranean has been very carefully studied in recent decades,\footnote{Except that, it now appears, they sometimes covered long distances to obtain materials that were available close to home, such as iron in Euboea (the}
more systematically for agricultural surpluses which they might import—thus we need to divide the Mediterranean environment into places capable and incapable of producing such surpluses, and once again we come back to demography. The places from which such agricultural surpluses might be obtained would normally not be very distant, which underlines the extraordinary nature of the Roman power which could import grain in huge quantities from Egypt to the capital. Innumerable facts underline the importance of water-borne transport: in Bronze-Age Italy, for instance, that was how metals made their journeys, by river or along the coast. Since we still do not have a first-rate map of the Mediterranean mineral resources that were exploitable in antiquity, we have quite a way to go before we understand the effects of their distribution.

That of course leaves us with some fifteen hundred years of ancient history still to go, including the high period of Mediterranean exchange dating from the second century BC to the


50 Cf. the map in M. E. Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2001), 124, showing the 'Main products of exchange in Tyrian trade in Ezekiel'.


second or third century AD. Horden and Purcell have many trenchant things to say about ancient trade—including a vigorous critique of the view Hopkins baptized as 'static minimalism'—, but there is much more to say, even now, especially about intensification and decline.

- The technical means developed by all the peoples in the region to deal with the nuts and bolts of all this connectedness. We should include here nautical technology, the diffusion of information, and development and spread of the skills, for instance in textile production and in mining, which the Bronze- and Iron-Age Mediterranean region required. Further down the road, but outside the realm of environmental history, we will come to the social changes that followed from adapting to such forms of connectedness as migration, external markets, and the importation of basic commodities.

- How much economic interdependence was there among Mediterranean (coastal and hinterland) populations at any given period? Finley claimed in one of his last works that the ancient economy was not 'integrated', even under the Roman Empire, which is both true and untrue. It would be more fertile to ask about interdependence, since lack of 'integration' may mainly have resulted from the relative slowness of communications. Interdependence, like carrying capacity, needs to be seen in the context of perceived needs. We should consider here not simply the widespread dependence on imported commodities, but the widespread use, especially by Phoenicians, Greeks and

53 The view, that is, that economic life experienced minimal development from one period of antiquity to another, never provided more than a bare subsistence livelihood to the vast majority of the population, and never witnessed any but the simplest economic institutions. Against static minimalist views of ancient Mediterranean commerce: CS 146–52. Not that I can agree with the authors' characterization of 'existing approaches to Mediterranean trade' (p. 144).

54 For basic bibliography see CS 565.

55 See among other recent publications J. Andreau and C. Virilouves (eds.), *L'Information et le mer dans le monde antique* (Rome, 2002).

Romans, of colonization for the maintenance of population equilibrium.\(^{57}\)

- **To what extent was there ever a cultural unity?** It is evident that scholars set the bar at very different heights. For some the supposedly Mediterranean-wide and millennia-long preoccupation with honour has seemed sufficient; others, taking the one period of ancient history in which a single power imposed itself on the whole Mediterranean, the Roman Empire, have argued that the Romans did not succeed in producing cultural unity, even of a bi-cultural Graeco-Roman kind. That is a vital question in Roman history (that is to say in history in the Mediterranean), but we should probably be content if we could show that there were any widely shared and characteristic features. We shall return to honour in the following section. According to P. Brown, on the other hand, the centrepiece of the ancient Mediterranean was the city,\(^{58}\) in the Greek sense of course. This is a traditional and reasonable point of view—which *The Corrupting Sea* has now in effect attempted to demolish (though not without equivocations); more will be said about this too in the next section. The question for us in this context should rather be whether the Mediterranean environment, and the immediate human reaction to it, brought about any noteworthy commonalities of culture. And if there were such features, how distinctive were they?

3. **UNITY?**

A brief essay such as this cannot discuss any of the above questions in full, but in order to deal with the issue of Mediterraneanism (Section 6), I must at least discuss unity. For the

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60 The point is made repeatedly: see ibid. 238–39; J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean: an Essay in Comparative Social Anthropology* (London, 1977), 41, etc. Other places in the world have Mediterranean climates—significant parts of Australia, California, Chile, South Africa; for some useful comparisons see F. di Castri, 'An Ecological Overview of the Five Regions with a Mediterranean Climate', in R. H. Groves and F. di Castri (eds.), *Biogeography of Mediterranean Invasions* (Cambridge, 1991), 3–16.

historical than ecological, though he took account of three physical frontier zones, the Sahara, ‘Europe’, and the Atlantic (with the Middle East apparently subsumed under the Sahara). But it is symptomatic that even Braudel found it practically impossible to define his ‘greater Mediterranean’: ‘we should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one, some political, some economic, and some cultural’; according to this logic, Goethe was in the Mediterranean even before he left Frankfurt.\textsuperscript{62}

Wine and olive oil will in fact serve us quite well as defining features of the ancient Mediterranean, in spite of the Mesopotamian anomaly. Consumption may be a more useful indicator than production, and thanks to the archaeology of amphorae we can produce at least an approximate map of olive oil consumption in the period of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{63} Archaeobotany can now present a much more elaborate picture of all the domesticated plants known in this general region in ancient times,\textsuperscript{64} as well as describing the spread of vine and olive tree cultivation from east to west. Two questions seem to need answering now: can we determine more precisely what proportion of the caloric needs of the Mediterranean population was met by wine and by olive oil? And which structural features of ancient societies and economies can be attributed to the logic of vine and olive tree cultivation? Horden and Purcell say that we should not see trade in olive oil as ‘a harbinger of a commercial economy’,\textsuperscript{65} but it is most unclear why not.

Another much-studied feature is transhumant pastoralism, widespread virtually throughout Mediterranean lands over several millennia. Like the vendetta, it appeals to scholars through being so obviously deep-rooted in time, and it is often said to be distinctively Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{66} Which may suggest that a practice can be distinctive but at the same time not defining.

What Horden and Purcell insist on as the peculiarity of Mediterranean food production is that it was especially full of risk.\textsuperscript{67} The risks are clear enough: the difficulty is that risk is also the chronic condition of pre-modern farmers (and not only pre-modern ones), in plenty of other places, such as, purely for the sake of example, China and tropical Africa.\textsuperscript{68} ‘It is the frequency of change from year to year, in both production and distribution, that makes Mediterranean history distinctive’, it is said.\textsuperscript{69} That would be hard to establish. ‘In France, there were sixteen nation-wide famines between 1700 and 1789’.\textsuperscript{70}

A stronger meaning of Mediterranean ecological unity depends on whether local economies are solidly connected to the wider Mediterranean (and disconnected from other parts of the world?). If a great many people who lived on the Mediterranean’s shores at any particular time were autarkic fishermen or pastoralists or farmers, then the Mediterranean was not in this sense a unit. And in that case we should rate the Mediterranean less important at the date in question than other realms of connectedness such as the micro-microregion (if such a phrase is allowed) or a great river valley. But what in any case constitutes a connection? Not only cabotage, long-range trade, piracy and migration, but many other forms of human and also non-human movement, including the spread of plants and of diseases.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. 170. Horden and Purcell attempt to evade the problem of defining their Mediterranean by relying on the concept of microregions (CS 80), but this is a distraction or an escape mechanism rather than a solution.


\textsuperscript{64} See D. Zohary and M. Hopf, \emph{Domestication of Plants in the Old World: The Origin and Spread of Cultivated Plants in West Asia, Europe and the Nile Valley} (note the choice of area) 3rd edn. (Oxford, 2000); and cf. CS 210, 262.

\textsuperscript{65} CS 213. CS 211–20 discusses the implications of widespread wine and olive cultivation.

\textsuperscript{66} See for instance P. Garnsey, \emph{Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World} (Cambridge, 1988), 201.

\textsuperscript{67} CS 178, 287. The notion that it was environmental risk that led ancient Mediterranean communities to communicate with one another seems particularly unsupported.

\textsuperscript{68} In a survey of world pastoralism, the only region where risk management, rather than profit maximization, is said to be the aim is as it happens the Andes: D. L. Brown, ‘High Altitude Camelid Pastoralism of the Andes’, in J. G. Galaty and D. L. Johnson (eds.), \emph{The World of Pastoralism: Herding Systems in Comparative Perspective} (New York and London, 1990), 323–52: 325–6.

\textsuperscript{69} CS 74.

\textsuperscript{70} M. J. Daunton, \emph{Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700–1850} (Oxford, 1995), 56.
It can also be argued that, for a large part of the three millennia we have under consideration, the people of the Mediterranean were very effectively linked by warfare, for the people they fought against, at least until the moment when Caesar invaded Gallia Comata, were very often Mediterranean too (no need to point out all the exceptions). And all this had quite a series of effects on the environment, even if we leave out of the account the subsequent effects of empire. The records of ancient Mediterranean warfare suggest that it was usually carried out with as much destruction of the enemy’s natural resources as could possibly be achieved with the technology available—"with the important proviso that some conquerors (but how many?) may have taken thought for the future productivity of their putative future subjects. A change of political masters might have little impact on ordinary life, but prolonged periods of warfare could destroy fixed capital, diminish trade and reduce agricultural productivity—some of the main events in the history of the late-antique economy."

One of the central theses of The Corrupting Sea is that the ‘connectivity’ was always there to some degree even when the Mediterranean world seems to have been most fragmented. That is undoubtedly true to some extent, but the important question must be how far the potential was realized from one age to another: this is the essence of a historical account of Mediterranean connections. We want to know how and why the connections strengthened in the second millennium BC, supplementing those that already existed in the Middle East, and strengthened much more from the time of the expansion and colonization by the Phoenicians and Greeks that began in the ninth and eighth centuries. These questions lead inevitably to the relative importance or otherwise of other, non-Mediterranean connections. Consider, for instance, how the use of bronze is now thought to have spread across Europe from the Middle East: to judge from a recent study by C. F. E. Pare (Map 2), the Mediterranean was not the sole or even a crucial vector."

In the period of the Twelfth Dynasty (1991–1786 BC), though Egyptian ships could have reached the Aegean, they seem not to have done so; during the Eighteenth Dynasty (1575–1308), on the other hand,—or perhaps during the period of the Hyksos in the seventeenth century BC—the two areas were in contact. In the second millennium BC the western half of the Mediterranean was mostly untouched by the peoples of its eastern half until Mycenaeans reached South Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia—a by now very familiar story. When the network of connections grew stronger, in the age of colonization, it of course affected the western Mediterranean environment profoundly, not only by means of vines and olive trees, but through intensified mineral extraction, urbanization, hydraulic engineering, and in other ways too. How these connections came into being, and how they weakened in late antiquity, are much-studied problems, hardly to be eliminated by the thought that they were always there potentially. It was especially disappointing that The Corrupting Sea did not really address the evidence, simply enormous in extent, for a prolonged period of late-antique and early medieval economic decline, except to say in effect that it is a historiographically commonplace (in part traceable back to Ibn Khaldun); not all historical commonplaces are false, and much of the evidence is in any case material.

71 No need here to refer to the large literature on this topic. According to W. G. Sebald, ‘the innermost principle of every war...is to aim for as wholesale an annihilation of the enemy with his dwellings, his history, and his natural environment as can possibly be achieved’ (On the Natural History of Destruction, trans. A. Bell (London and New York, 2003; original edn. Luftkrieg und Literatur, Munich, 1999), 19). I imagine that some would disagree, but they are more likely to be lawyers or classicists than historians.


CS esp. 160–72.
But for many scholars Mediterranean unity has meant much more than all this: it has meant primarily or indeed exclusively cultural unity. And thereby hangs a many-sided dispute which has flickered on for decades. My concern here is limited to ancient history and once again to the methodological question as to how one might establish the existence of a cultural unity in the ancient Mediterranean. It is not enough any more to write about ‘the basic homogeneity of Mediterranean civilization’. I will make five observations (and later allow the discussion to spill over into Section 6 below):

- There is no longer any point in discovering that ancient Mediterranean people shared some particular social-psychological characteristic, such as an intense devotion to honour (in some sense or other of that long-suffering word) or to female chastity (in some sense or other), unless you can make at least a plausible case that the rest of humanity has usually been less interested. Herzfeld and De Pina-Cabral demonstrated years ago that the old favourite honour was a very opaque lens through which to inspect the twentieth-century Mediterranean world. That may also be true, in spite of the undoubted importance of honour for many Greeks and Romans, for the region’s ancient history and for the longue durée: the question is familiar but still needs re-examining. Dover caustically wrote that as far as honour and shame are concerned, ‘I find very little in a Mediterranean village which was not already familiar to me from a London suburb’. What is honour in any case? Is it exclusively the property of men of standing? Does it primarily concern war? Or sexual codes? Is it mainly a feature of face-to-face societies? And so on. How can we decide how much importance it possesses in any given society? Obviously not without making comparisons.

- A historical work cannot legitimately address this question of the cultural unity of the Mediterranean on the level of the ethnographic present, recent writers notwithstanding. The methodology concerned is wholly inadmissible: we cannot extrapolate the ancient Mediterranean from the ethnographic Mediterranean (the modern Mediterranean is yet a third phenomenon). All suggestions of cultural continuity between the ancient and the recent Mediterranean are to be regarded with caution. For the Greeks see H. Lloyd-Jones, ‘Ehre und Schande in der griechischen Kultur’, Antike und Abendland 33 (1987), 1–28, repr. in English in Greek Comedy, Hellenistic Literature, Greek Religion, and Miscellanea (Oxford, 1990), 253–80; for Rome J. E. Lendon, Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World (Oxford, 1997) (who sees, p. 32 n. 5, that his evidence concerns people of high status). But neither account has the necessary comparative dimension. I return to this matter in the next section.


83 CS 522–3. They conclude that ‘honour and shame are indeed deeply held values across the region’ (p. 523), without clarifying either terms or sense. A similar lack of attention to tense can be seen in Sant Cassia, ‘Authors’, 7 (‘culture contact was significant’ (is, has been?)); Shaw, 451–2.
the greatest suspicion; *The Corrupting Sea* vividly summarizes the many types of disruption that throughout their period (and since, it may be added) disturbed rural life, from invasions of settlers to the manipulations of the powerful.\(^{84}\)

One of the most lucid and persuasive ancient historians who have made use of Mediterranean anthropology in recent times has been David Cohen. The crucial point in his theoretical argument is the *faute-de-mieux* gambit (no one has found a better model than the ethnographic Mediterranean)\(^{85}\)—which comes close to circularity. What we need is what Cohen in fact attempts to provide in his later work, a much wider ethnography which can be applied to specific historical problems (see below, Section 6).

- If we are going to engage in the comparative history of Mediterranean or other cultures, we should pay more attention to difficulties of translation and to linguistic nuances, concerning honour among other subjects.\(^{86}\) Translation problems can be quite fundamental.\(^{87}\) An ethnography of Mediterranean honour that failed to analyse the vocabulary of the subject in Arabic would have little value.\(^{88}\) The vocabulary of honour in

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\(^{84}\) *CS* 275–7. The authors' belief in 'mutability' was referred to earlier. Their practice, however, verges on the inconsistent: they often 'turn to the recent past for illumination of remoter periods' (*CS* 465, with cross-references). They claim to have used Mediterranean anthropology 'selectively' (ibid.), and they can at the very least be credited with having dedicated two lengthy chapters to discussing the issue (XI and XII).

\(^{85}\) *Late, Sexuality, and Society in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 1991), 38–41. It must be added at once that Cohen was concerned with a specific set of historical problems which he in my view succeeded in illuminating brilliantly. He also maintains that his model is immune to Herzfedian objections because it is based on many different Mediterranean societies; but that is simply a technical improvement. Later, Cohen seems to have modified his approach (below, p. 40).


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Hellenistic and Roman—imperial Greek still needs attention, the Latin words even more;\(^{89}\) and once again let us not make the Mediterranean too Graeco-Roman.

- Can we legitimately say that ancient Mediterranean culture was urban? This has been widely assumed, and the doctrine has been the foundation for whole programmes of research.\(^{90}\) Horden and Purcell have now contested the notion and presented an interesting alternative way of looking at patterns of Mediterranean settlement. But their doctrine seems to have fallen on somewhat stony ground,\(^{91}\) and we shall re-consider the issue (though all too briefly) in the following section.

- Nothing like cultural unity in more general terms was ever reached in the coastlands of the ancient Mediterranean prior to the Roman conquests, that is obvious, but it remains a central and open question of Roman history how much the populations of these territories, and not just their elites, shared social forms, productive technology, languages, artistic forms, religious practices and beliefs, and many other cultural features. Horden and Purcell claim that such cultural unity as there was lasted into the Middle Ages;\(^{92}\) be that as it may, the study of cultural unity has to be the study of its formation and disintegration.

### 4. 'RURALIZING' ANCIENT HISTORY

The most original aspect of *The Corrupting Sea* may be its attempt to 'ruralize' ancient and medieval history (the authors' quotation marks). The whole category of town or city is made to shrink into insignificance. These terms are not being wholly wished out of existence, but neither is this simply a shift of

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\(^{89}\) *Lendon, Empire*, 272–9, gathers some material, but his analysis of the Latin vocabulary is a model of how such things should not be done: in particular he forces a number of different concepts into the straightjacket of English.

\(^{90}\) The Copenhagen Polis Centre, founded by M. H. Hansen. Its publications have been extensive.


\(^{92}\) Yet in *CS* this doctrine is set about with so many reservations that one may be confused as to where the authors finally stand.
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emphasist. Towns, in the view of Horden and Purcell, are simply microregions writ small (or large?), and there is no ‘urban variable’ that made town life ‘qualitatively ... different from that of other settlements’. Now we see why Rostovtzeff, Pirenne, Goitein, and Braudel were singled out at the beginning of the book as the four historians to undermine. It was a slightly odd line-up for the year 2000, for none of them, not even Braudel, could be said to represent what scholars currently think about the history of the ancient or medieval Mediterranean—a subject that has inevitably passed into other hands; but, as historians, they were all lovers of cities.

Here Horden and Purcell are almost symmetrically at odds with the dominant trend in anthropology, and their approach seems retardataire, since it echoes what De Pina-Cabral has called ‘the ruralist emphasis of social anthropology’ characteristic of the 1950s—and still detectable in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the anthropology of consumption and a variety of other interests have led anthropologists more and more to town.

In the end, I think that this ‘ruralization’ is misguided, but it has an immediate attraction. Most ancient and medieval people are widely believed to have lived in the countryside. What proportion is of course unknown, and estimates will partly depend on defining such terms as ‘town’ and ‘village’. Hopkins has guessed that the urban population of the Mediterranean provinces of the Roman Empire might have made up 10 to 20 per cent of the total. Horden and Purcell conjecture, for the pre-industrial Mediterranean, an urban population of ‘3, 5, 10 per cent: a figure of that order’. It would make no sense, obviously, to apply a single figure both to the Bronze Age and to the high Roman Empire, and the highest of their figures is presumably what they hypothesize for the Roman world.

There is in fact a glaring and fascinating problem here. Many scholars might be inclined to suppose that survey archaeology has demonstrated the truth of the Horden–Purcell hypothesis. ‘Traditionally’, so one writer observes, ‘most of the rural population of the Mediterranean has lived in nucleated villages or towns, far from the majority of their fields’—but his belief is that survey archaeology has shown that in classical antiquity much more of the population lived on scattered farms. There are certainly arguments for supposing that in some areas of the Roman Empire, at least, the population was very dispersed. Yet the traditional pattern, according to which the great majority, at least in some parts of the Mediterranean region, dwelled in large villages or small towns, may often have obtained in antiquity too. Here is a scholar with an unsurpassed knowledge of the ancient Greek countryside: ‘for most periods of antiquity the Greeks preferred to live in such nucleated settlements, even when they were supporting themselves primarily from agriculture’. The whole issue—too complex to be entered into here—needs reconsideration on as large a canvas as possible.

Nonetheless this ‘ruralization’ has some visceral appeal, at least as an experiment and as a change of perspective. Not that the approach is entirely new, and there has been no great

93 CS 92.
94 CS 96. But they hold that ‘the Mediterranean has been the most durably and densely urbanized region in world history.... The major cities have... been the sites... in which the fortunes of its populations have principally been determined’ (CS 90). The town drives the authors to a shameless display of verbal bravura: incastellamento, densening, tentacular.
95 CS 91 says that these four ‘dominate modern thinking about the Mediterranean’. It is the tense that is wrong.
97 See, for instance, Sant Cassia, ‘Authors in Search’, 10.
99 CS 92.
shortage, over the last generation, of studies of the Greek and Roman countryside and its inhabitants.\textsuperscript{104} ‘Ruralization’, however, could have the valuable effect of concentrating extra attention on any number of interesting historical problems. The history of Greek and Roman religion, for instance, almost always has an excessively urban focus, and \textit{The Corrupting Sea} does well to counteract this tendency in its chapter on the geography of religion. There are many other questions to explore, from characteristically rural forms of dispute and cooperation to rural metallurgy.\textsuperscript{105}

A town, say Horden and Purcell, implicitly contradicting the experience of many ancient historians, is not ‘a particularly helpful category’. They add, still more provocatively, that ‘there is no particular quality of urban space that automatically colours belief and action within it... a town is an address, an arena, an architectonic agglomeration’.\textsuperscript{106} Urban history has its place, they agree with decided reluctance, and there is ‘scope for a history of the region which starts from its countryside and, as it were, looks inwards to the town’;\textsuperscript{107} but they have left their readers with the strong impression that towns and cities are extraneous to their account. The arguments in favour of this position are scarcely cogent.\textsuperscript{108} I still prefer the Braudel


\textsuperscript{105} There is naturally a sizeable existing bibliography on both of these themes. For some comments see respectively \textit{CS} 283–84 and 184.

\textsuperscript{106} Both quotations: \textit{CS} 90. The word ‘automatically’ is something of a red herring. In my view, the authors have allowed themselves to be unduly influenced by R. J. Holton, \textit{Cities, Capitalism and Civilization} (London, 1986), who had a specific aim in mind when he diminished the city’s historical role. To the many works that maintain the importance of the city can now be added J. W. H. G. Liebeschuetz, \textit{The Decline and Fall of the Roman City} (Oxford, 2001).

\textsuperscript{107} \textit{CS} 91. They are willing to talk about ‘settlements’, however (108–12).

\textsuperscript{108} There is little point in asserting that scholars do not agree very well how ‘town’ and ‘city’ should be defined (\textit{CS} 92–6; see rather Fentress and Fentress, 212)—by that route you could argue that such categories are useless in modern history too. We deserve instead a careful analysis of what in fact differentiated ancient settlements, taking into account all that valuable French work about ‘agglomérations secondaires’. One wonders whether Horden and of \textit{Civilization and Capitalism}: ‘towns are like electric transformers’.\textsuperscript{109}

We may agree that ancient history often used to be too urban in outlook, but what is needed now is not paradox or exaggeration but a balanced approach which recognizes the crucial element that towns represented—even in the Bronze-Age Mediterranean and certainly later. Starting in the Ancient Near East, and even more emphatically from the eighth century BC onwards, towns in various degrees conditioned the economic life of vast numbers of Mediterranean people, and helped to determine the course of the entire history of ancient culture. There is no end to describing and defining the relationship between town and country, and once again the story varies from period to period, but the central point is too obvious to bear much repetition. Even from the most narrowly environmental perspective, the town was of central importance. Does anyone think that the Phoenicians or Greeks would have been able to colonize the Mediterranean if they had not possessed urban settlements? Leveau showed long ago how, in the western Roman Empire, the location and nature of towns profoundly affected patterns of rural settlement, from Algeria to Britain.\textsuperscript{110} Even if for some obscure reason the complex term ‘Romanization’ were to be rejected by informed historians, the fact would remain that the spread of Roman power really did mean a measure of urbanization,\textsuperscript{111} and of a specific kind, with environmental as well as other consequences.

It was in towns that specialist workers of almost all kinds came into existence, it was in towns that wealth was accumulated, it was in towns that decisions were made about peace and war (Horden and Purcell’s Mediterranean world is too peaceful). As for qualitative differences, it was in town that most literacy was imparted, it was mainly in town that Romans

Purcell would like to expel the town from the history of pre-modern Asia as well (on the environmental aspects of Indian Ocean urbanization prior to 1750 see K. Chaudhuri, \textit{Asia before Europe} (Cambridge, 1990), 368–74).

\textsuperscript{109} The opening words of ch. 8 of \textit{The Structures of Everyday Life}.


\textsuperscript{111} Cf. S. Keay and N. Terrenato (eds.), \textit{Italy and the West: Comparative Issues in Romanization} (Oxford, 2001).
benefited from aqueducts, it was in town that if they were very poor they sought casual work. And so on. And then there are the big cities, Rome, Alexandria, and one or two others. It was not their population that mattered most, but their consumption power and the huge numbers of workers, agricultural and otherwise, that it took to maintain them.

5. CATEGORIES, DYNAMIC PROCESSES, CAUSATION, AND AVOIDING CONCLUSIONS

The Corrupting Sea has other major points of interest in addition to ‘ruralization’. All scholarly readers have appreciated its theoretical and empirical erudition, which spans several traditionally separate disciplines. It is also refreshing to read a book about ancient history in which the physical places and mankind act upon each other. Another great strength resides in the book’s close attention to local differences in topography, environment, and economic practice. An excellent example, a model of its kind to a certain degree, is the account of Cyrenaica, bringing out the great environmental differences within this microregion (not so very micro: the plateau is some 400 kilometres long); yet this is generally acknowledged to be an exceptionally variegated environment. The conclusion is that ‘topographical fragmentation’ and ‘the connectivity provided by the sea itself’ are ‘the two key environmental ingredients’ in Mediterranean history. This seems at once familiar and yet arbitrary—what of the scattered incidence of crucial resources, in particular minerals, and what of the capacity of certain areas for producing sizeable grain surpluses?

The purpose of The Corrupting Sea, the authors say, is to discover how far the region showed, over three millennia, unity and distinctiveness, and secondly ‘what kinds of continuity could have been involved’. This distinctiveness, in their view, consists mainly in risk and response to risk, a conclusion we have already commented on briefly in Section 3. The continuity, they argue, is provided by an environment that in spite of all vicissitudes, never experiences ‘catastrophe’.

This is a strange kind of conclusion. What counts as a catastrophe? Presumably nothing in the way of ordinary misery or ordinary climatic events is going to qualify. There seems to be plenty of evidence for microregional famines in the better documented eras of antiquity. And if we want major catastrophes, the candidates are very few—the eruption of Thera, the end of the Mycenaean (perhaps a mainly military event), the epidemics that troubled the Roman Empire in the second and fifth centuries AD, deforestation. As for epidemics, Duncan-Jones and others have reinstated the demographic importance of the smallpox epidemic that began under Marcus Aurelius, and a strong case can be made for seeing it as a catastrophic event. In the case of deforestation, Horden and Purcell, while allowing that there was periodically over-felling of woodland, choose to support the ‘optimistic’ case repeatedly stated by O. Rackham. But the reader familiar with, among other things, the remarkable evidence from Greenland about the level of copper-smelting in the Roman Mediterranean, or with the vast consumption of wood in the Roman Empire—not least for heating baths—requires a fuller and more balanced presentation of the evidence to be convinced.

117 Garnsey, Famine and Food Supply.
119 CS 182-6, 338 (there is a Panglossian tone to these passages). The authors are prepared to admit that there were ‘fewer dense woodlands...in the nineteenth century than there had been in the Bronze Age’ (p. 339), but what I have in mind is a difference between (say) the fifth century BC and the first century AD For O. Rackham’s views, which cannot unfortunately be discussed in full here, see ‘Ecology and Pseudo-ecology’. It is interesting to see what a role timber shortage plays in a recent (much-debated) comparative history of the eighteenth-century economies of north-west Europe and China (K. Pomeranz, The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy (Princeton, 2000), 219-42).
120 Greenland: S. Hong, J.-P. Candelone, C. C. Patterson, and C. F. Bouthon, ‘History of Ancient Copper Smelting Pollution during Roman and Medieval Times Recorded in Greenland Ice’, Science 272 (1996), 246-9, etc. For wood consumption under the Roman Empire CS 185 adopts an estimate by H. N. le Houërou (‘Impact of Man and his Animals on Mediterranean

112 CS 65-74. 113 CS 101. 114 CS 9. 115 CS 287, etc. 116 CS 338-41.
Empire as a whole managed its timber resources sensibly is not realistic.

The primary analytic choice of Horden and Purcell is to dissolve or dispense with a number of seldom-questioned categories. They claim that their argument is directed against typologies, but the attack goes much further than that. It is never unmotivated, but seldom if ever does it succeed (so it seems to me). Towns we have already considered. More fundamentally still, the authors wish away periods, and in particular any divide between ancient and medieval. Lines of connectivity were never truly broken, they say. They speak instead of a complex tangle of abatements. Now, no historian doubts that major changes of period are complex affairs—hence all those interminable arguments, more beloved of continental scholars than of Anglo-Saxons, about continuity and discontinuity. But the Mediterranean world underwent vast economic and social as well as political and religious changes in late antiquity. What appears to be the key section of The Corrupting Sea simply does not face the evidence for major changes, let alone explain them.

It is perhaps less clear what The Corrupting Sea wants to do to the distinction between private enterprise and the state: the authors simply say they want to by-pass it. ‘That is to be

Vegetation’, in F. di Castri, D. W. Goodall, and R. L. Specht (eds.), Mediterranean-type Shrublands (Amsterdam and Oxford, 1981), 479–521: 514 for the 1980 consumption by 50 million people living in developing Mediterranean countries—27 million tons a year; but even this estimate is quite likely, for reasons (climactic among others) that cannot be entered into here, to be too low.

121 CS 101. 122 CS 154–5.
123 CS 263–70. But see Fentress and Fentress, review, Past and Present, 214–17: 215: ‘the fact that we cannot pin down a moment when the change takes place does not prove that it never happened. . . . Between the third and the end of the seventh century many Roman landscapes disappeared for ever [details follow].’ Compare the overview of the late-antique/early mediaeval city in G. P. Brogiolo and B. Ward-Perkins (eds.), The Idea and Ideal of the Town between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Leiden, 1999), pp. xv–xvi: there was no mere transformation, ‘the changes that occurred in urban life generally look more like the dissolution of a sophisticated and impressive experiment in how to order society . . .’.
124 CS 338. For the systemic linking of state and private enterprise’ in the ancient Mediterranean world see Shaw, review (n. 28), 441–2 (Roman republican publicani, etc.), and cf. Van De Mieroop, below p. 136.
125 It is impossible to resist mentioning the extreme case, the aqueduct of Roman Aphanca, which was about 150 km long: J.-C. Balty, ‘Problèmes de l’eau à Aphanée de Syrie’, in P. Louis, F. Métral, and J. Métral (eds.), L’Homme et l’eau en Méditerranée et du Proche Orient (Paris and Lyon, 1987), iv, 11–23: 16–21. Later, a delightful Arabic story about a beautiful princess was necessary in order to explain it.
127 CS 86, 87, for instance.
128 CS 221, 75, 58.
129 According to CS 74 you cannot therefore properly generalize about the prosperity or desolation of regions. Or (more plausibly) you cannot generalize about the economies or societies of mountain regions (pp. 80–1). But of course
avowed purpose is to produce a more dynamic account, but the effect is to produce one so atomized that the great changes involving man and the environment that did occur within their 3,000-year, or 2,000-year, period seem to lack all explanation. Humans went on being tenacious and ingenious (or not, as the case might be), which explains nothing. Yet the authors see clearly that the 'static minimalist' account of the economic world of Graeco-Roman antiquity is now most definitely untenable.

6. MEDITERRANEANISM AND ANCIENT HISTORY: IN FAVOUR OF A WIDER ETHNOGRAPHY

Mediterraneanism was defined earlier as the doctrine that there are distinctive characteristics which the cultures of the Mediterranean have, or have had, in common—from which it has been thought to follow that one may extrapolate the importance of social practices and their meanings from one Mediterranean society to another. It might be accounted optimistic to expect much from a theory so obviously related both to a quasi-Orientalist desire to assert cultural superiority (they have amoral familism) and to touristic nostalgia. But I will attempt to weigh it in the balance.

First of all, we should take note of the fact that Mediterraneanism is often nowadays little more than a reflex. The Mediterranean seems somehow peculiarly vulnerable to misuse. 'A deep familiarity with the dream-images of his fellow Mediterraneans assured Artemidorus of the iconic verity of these gods as dreams' is simply rather sloppy prose. Another author picks phrases from Friedl's description of the people of you can do both, if you make room for necessary exceptions and there are not too many of them (whether Braudel was right about mountain regions, MMW, i. 25–33, we need not decide, but Horden and Purcell simplify his analysis).

130 CS 464.
131 CS 146–7.
132 P. C. Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1994), 29. Artemidorus of Daldis claimed to have listened to immense numbers of dreams in Greece, Asia, Italy and in the largest and most populous of the islands' (*Oneir. i*, proemium, p. 2 in Pack's edn.).

Vasilika and transfers them to 'the Romans'. But this kind of thing should not be especially difficult to guard against.

The alternatives to Mediterraneanism are now two. One is to ignore comparative history altogether, and it is this option that many ancient historians fall into in their year-to-year practice. The other choice is to pursue broader comparisons and a less restricted ethnography. The authors of *The Corrupting Sea* assert that their book is 'as comparative as anti-Mediterraneanism recommends'. But at the same time they maintain not only that living in this region was, in antiquity, peculiarly a matter of managing risk (a matter we discussed earlier), but that 'honour and shame are indeed deeply held values right across the region'; this, they say, is guaranteed by the fact that some of the evidence comes from 'indigenous scholars'. If this were simply an assertion about the validity of certain ethnographic conclusions, it would be left on one side here, my concern being ancient history, but the implication seems clear that the film can be rewound (*à la* Bloch), or at least that Mediterranean unity in one period makes it more plausible in another.

The point here is not whether the 'indigenous scholars' have it right when they detect honour and shame as deeply held values in particular regions: they are after all scholars, and therefore as vulnerable to academic topoi as anyone else. The fact is that we still have no reason to think that honour is a distinctively Mediterranean preoccupation. Given the downright superficial attitude of most Mediterraneanists towards the Arab world, we are scarcely in a position to define Mediterranean honour, let alone proclaim it to be different from the honour which we may encounter in Ireland, Iceland, or Indonesia. And still less do we have reason to impose these particular hypothetical characteristics of the modern Mediterranean world on the ancient Mediterranean world.

But let us consider some particular historical problems, in order to illustrate the principal argument of this final section. In recent years there has been a lively debate concerning Athenian

133 C. Barton, *Roman Honor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001), 271.
134 These quotations: CS 523.
135 The authors say (p. 523 again) that what they are engaged in here is a 'primarily historical enquiry into Mediterranean unity'.
notions about revenge, and there is more to learn, without any
doubt, about both Greek and Roman attitudes and what may
underlie them. In the course of this debate, Mediterranean
comparisons have raised some interesting questions—but it
has been difference that has been most intriguing: while ven-
detta (in the English and French sense, i.e. a long series of
killings and counter-killings) has been characteristic of certain
regions such as Sicily and Corsica (that is to say, as they were in
ethnographic time), it was arguably a rare phenomenon in
Graeco-Roman antiquity. The Oresteia was a particularly horrif-
ic story.\textsuperscript{136} The fact is, however, that if you want to study
how any given society has dealt with the apparently innate
human desire to inflict revenge, a matter which forces itself
into the consciousness of all communities everywhere, there is
not the slightest advantage in limiting oneself to the Medi-
terranean.

Or consider again the question how much of the Greek or
Roman population lived in the countryside (above, p. 31),
which many scholars probably regard as an open question,
within certain broad limits. The comparative Mediterranean
evidence from early modern times is instructive, but it is not
definitive. A wider ethnography would certainly help: we need
to know about more cases in which pre-modern farming popula-
lations lived in town, more about which occupations besides
farming and flock-grazing kept pre-modern populations almost
all the time in the countryside, more about how much rural (or
urban) crime was too much to bear. The wider our angle of
vision the better.

What is needed in the study of the ancient world is a wide
frame of reference that accepts structural similarities from any-
where whatsoever while respecting the great divides such as the
emergence of agriculture and of industrialization. I do not refer
primarily to other areas of the ancient world well away from the
Mediterranean—northern Europe, south Russia, Mesopotamia,
Nubia—though it will scarcely have escaped anyone’s
attention that many of the questions set out above in Section 2
are not in fact exclusively Mediterranean questions at all. It is
the rest of the world I have in mind. This world-wide ethnog-
raphy—which is full of risks of course—is an old tradition,
which it is easy to trace back past E. R. Dodds to Frazier and
Tylor and to ‘a deep-seated conviction that human nature [is]
fundamentally uniform’.\textsuperscript{137} No such conviction is necessary,
however. Some limited patterns of cause and effect can some-
times be enough to bring about real progress.\textsuperscript{138}

One’s views about historical comparativism are certain to be
coloured by one’s own scholarly experience. I will describe one
case only, without suggesting that it should be taken as typical,
but at the same time in the conviction that it is methodologically
instructive. For generations a certain type of classicist liked to
insist that the mass of the population in the Greek and Roman
worlds was able to read and write. There was nothing surprising
about that: the literary evidence was limited in extent and not
overwhelmingly clear (though it was clear enough to enable
some scholars to get the matter right).\textsuperscript{139} Many ancient histor-
ians were in any case prevented from reaching a reasonable
conclusion by their obsession with writing history from above.
The papyrological evidence, a complicated though not especially
mysterious body of material, was only brought into the matter
in a useful fashion—by H. C. Youtie—from 1966 onwards.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{136} D. Cohen, \textit{Law, Violence and Community in Classical Athens} (Cam-
bridge, 1995), 16–21, makes use of comparative evidence to illuminate
the trilogy’s significance on the subject of feuding (cf. also Harris, \textit{Restraining
Rage}, 161–2). In this book Cohen in fact moved away from the heavily
Mediterranea

\textsuperscript{137} M. Herzfeld, \textit{Anthropology through the Looking-Glass} (Cambridge,

\textsuperscript{138} I take it that comparative historical \textit{method} mainly serves the purpose of
validating or invalidating historical models. But historical comparison can
serve many other purposes (cf. among others W. H. Sewell, ‘Marc Bloch
and the Logic of Comparative History’, \textit{History and Theory} 6 (1967), 208–
18: 215–16; M. Herzfeld, ‘Performing Comparisons: Ethnography, Globe-
trotting, and the Spaces of Social Knowledge’, \textit{Journal of Anthropological
Research} 57 (2001), 259–76).

\textsuperscript{139} Harris, \textit{Ancient Literacy}, 10, 94 n. 135.

\textsuperscript{140} His five most important papers were all reprinted in \textit{Scriptaunculae}
(Amsterdam, 1973) or \textit{Scriptaunculae Posterores} (Bonn, 1981).
which was in part the fault of ancient historians who were too inclined to treat Egyptian evidence as being irrelevant to the main questions of Greek and Roman history. There existed, in short, no credible model of the history of literacy in the Graeco-Roman world: we were supposed to believe that there was majority or mass literacy even though no one could produce adequate evidence for a system of popular education, or explain what the functions of all that literacy could have been. Meanwhile the history of literacy had made giant strides in other, better-documented, periods and places (from England to Liberia to Brazil).  

This story should not be oversimplified, and to some extent we can accommodate a Greek Sonderweg with respect to the written word. Indeed it is plain that many Greek communities harboured ideas about the ability to write that were quite different from those of most other pre-modern societies. What matters here, however, is that the optimum model for understanding pre-modern literacy—a model that explains the necessary and sufficient conditions for the increase of literacy (of various kinds) to various levels—can only be constructed out of materials from parts of the world where illuminating work has previously been done. The first three important pieces of research, in chronological order of publication, described England, France, and New England. The Mediterranean as such had nothing to do with it.

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141 For a basic bibliography of such work down to that time see Harris, Ancient Literacy, 367–9.