



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History by Peregrine Horden; Nicholas Purcell
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Sørensen's book represents a major contribution to the field of gender archeology. While most publications on the subject comprise conference papers of uneven quality (see T. Cullen's review article, "Contributions to Feminism in Archaeology," *AJA* 100 [1996] 409–14), synthetic treatments are extremely rare (although note R. Gilchrist's recent *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past* [London and New York 1999]). Sørensen's work is particularly welcome for its serious attention to such mundane concerns as food and dress. Although these areas of research have often been devalued as issues of interest to women only, Sørensen makes a strong case for their being central to the very structure of society.

While Sweely's volume will be of interest primarily to researchers in the New World, Sørensen's volume will be essential reading to all scholars in any subfield of the discipline with an interest in gender. Although the archaeology of gender has long lingered on the periphery, Sørensen's book firmly establishes its centrality in archaeological research.

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THE CORRUPTING SEA: A STUDY OF MEDITERRANEAN HISTORY, by *Peregrine Horden* and *Nicholas Purcell*. Pp. xiv + 761, maps 36. Blackwell, Oxford 2000. \$74.95 (cloth); \$34.95 (paper). ISBN 0-631-13666-5 (cloth); 0-631-21890-4 (paper).

In the acknowledgements to this weighty tome, Horden and Purcell quip that when they told the venerable (now deceased) ancient historian Arnaldo Momigliano of their undertaking, he simply laughed. The 20-century-long scope of this volume (never mind the planned second volume) might make anyone skeptical. Indeed, not since the publication of Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (English ed., New York 1972) has anyone tried to write a history "of" (as opposed to "in") the Mediterranean (but recall that Braudel was concerned with three centuries, not 20). In Braudellian terms, the authors rightfully stress that they must be more concerned with *histoire problème* than with *histoire totale*. They suggest that, post-Braudel, the Mediterranean region has ceased to be an intelligible geospatial unity (except to Horden and Purcell?) and that geo-historical studies "of" the Mediterranean—especially those concerned with its unity—reached a low point. No doubt every review of this volume will compare and contrast it with Braudel, and that is not inappropriate; the authors themselves are fully aware of that pedigree (36–45), although they also draw attention to Rostovstev (ancient economic history), Pirenne (Medieval economic history), and Goitein (Medieval social history). I do not propose to compare and contrast, however, since such a task would be endless, and probably pointless. What I do propose is to review this volume from the perspective of a prehistorian, and to discuss its relevance for archaeolo-

gists as opposed to ancient or Medieval historians.

So what is this book all about, and for whom was it written? In their own words and providing as explicit a definition of this book as any is likely to be, Horden and Purcell state (44) that "what we outline are intended to be the general ecological principles with which the more usual kinds of Mediterranean history—economic, social or political—should mesh." This work, then, may be described as a socially informed, economically aware, historical ecology of Mediterranean peoples, places, and space, a history that is close to the soil, to the sea, and to the (sub)conscious mentalité. They attempt to integrate the study of Mediterranean production (*sensu lato*) and trade with an "ecologizing" approach, and to investigate unity, or disunity, in space and continuity, or discontinuity, over time. The authors stress more than once that they intend to avoid any taint of environmental determinism, and to assess the impact of "man" (*sic*) on the environment as well as that of the environment on "man" (44). Although they seem to praise an "ecosystemic" approach, they realize fully that to undertake such a study across time and throughout Mediterranean space would be a utopian ideal. And whereas they embrace anthropology (ethnography) and ecology, they do so cautiously and circumspectly; I suspect that most Mediterranean ethnographers or ecologists would find Horden and Purcell's excessively thick descriptions little to their liking. That said, however, those same ethnographers and ecologists would be the poorer for not having read, or at least made use of, this volume as a resource.

This is the greatest virtue of *The Corrupting Sea*, viz. its value as a resource and reference about anything and everything Mediterranean: ecology, "connectivity" (trade, shipping), technology (irrigation, cultivation, innovations, "countrymen"), "abatement and intensification" (settlement dispersal or nucleation), colonizations (but not colonialism), catastrophes (natural and human), commerce and mobility (goods, people, animals, textiles), sacred economies and landscapes. Issues related to ecology, redistribution, and the landscape crop up repeatedly, examined from different angles or with varying degrees of interest. Chapter 6, on subsistence and food systems, achieves a dauntingly holistic assessment of Mediterranean agrarian history, and stresses the interdependence of agricultural production and redistribution with factors such as forests, wetlands, scrublands, tree crops, gardens, fishing, animal husbandry, marginal (dry) areas, and more. Each of these subjects is discussed in elaborate detail: for example, how certain macquis species are used to smoke or cure meats and flavor them, or alternatively used as fuels, regrowing rapidly after fires or cutting (183–4).

An elaborate section (part 5, 60 pages) on the "uses of social anthropology" is rather less satisfactory. Horden and Purcell's treatment revolves almost exclusively around the concepts of honor and shame in Mediterranean societies, the bailiwick of social anthropology. Their main contribution is to scrutinize some detailed "historical" case studies that indicate that these values—honor ("a focus on the sexuality of women") and shame—show a loose unity throughout Mediterranean countries, whether Christian or Islamic: "the differences which resemble are continually striking" (507). Essentially, then, they question the stance of scholars such as Herzfeld and Pina-

Cabral, who argue against Mediterranean cultural unity because it implies a “pervasive archaism” in Mediterranean sociocultural anthropology. One wonders why the authors took up these issues rather than others that might promote, not question, the complementarity of these disciplines—gender or peasant studies, social identity, *habitus*? What Horden and Purcell have demonstrated in this long anthropological aside is unclear, beyond implying that anthropology cannot make a distinctive contribution to Mediterranean studies without historical depth.

It is in this very primacy ascribed to historical studies and the ever-present “text” where I find myself at odds with this otherwise utterly commendable volume. As is the case with ethnography and ecology, the authors at times praise archaeology, in particular landscape archaeology, and at other times seem to condemn it. They state that this book could not have been written without the “quantitative revolution” fostered by regional survey projects (176–7), yet they seldom employ survey results except to criticize them. For example, while the authors acknowledge the success of (science-based) attempts to reconstruct the environment, and commend the “tour de force of archéologie totale” inherent in the Melos survey project, overall they feel that such approaches have only “occasional contributions . . . to make to the larger project of Mediterranean ecological history”; Mediterranean archaeology is to be used “as one kind of evidence amongst many, not as the discipline that has provided an overarching model.” On the contrary, if any single field has provided a model for interpreting Mediterranean landscapes and reconstructing past environments, it is archaeology and in particular regional archaeological survey. While they at least mention the use of aerial photography and databases, they reveal no awareness of the use of satellite imagery, geobotanical studies, or geographic information systems (GIS) in assessing rural production, regional studies, and past landscapes. When, in chapter 6, Horden and Purcell make much ado about factors such as risk, storage, redistribution, and pastoralism lying at the heart of the Mediterranean agrosystem, their primary focus is on the (admittedly rich) textual evidence. And yet their wished-for links between human activities, geomorphological processes, and life cycles of other living things are increasingly the focus of regional survey projects throughout the Mediterranean.

Throughout its 523 pages of main text, this work reveals itself to be primarily by and for historians. Far too little is made of the inherent biases in all this rich textual and epigraphic evidence. At times Horden and Purcell seem to display an outright disdain for archaeology: for example, when they discuss the copious documentary information on trade in all its manifestations, they cannot refrain from mentioning that “the archaeology is limited and ambiguous” (168–9). The (unconscious?) attempt to cut archaeology down to size does not quite descend to the level of calling it a handmaiden to history, but clearly it is no more than one sort of evidence through which the ancient or Medieval historian must sift and judge. Given their awareness of current trends in archaeology, it is somewhat startling to read that the archaeology of the Medieval Mediterranean is “less well

served” to field survey: in truth this reflects only an earlier lack of attention throughout ancient world studies of most periods beyond Late Antiquity. Having castigated the characteristic purblindness of the literary observer to the process of production, Horden and Purcell reveal their own biases (and strengths) (177–8): “For ethnographic analysis of the centres that are much more normal in Mediterranean history—that is, the central places of the lowlands with easy access to the sea, rather than the remoter mountain villages—the only raw material available is derived from the vanished past, and must be interpreted by the historian.”

Much effort goes into establishing, or questioning, the concept of the Mediterranean, its unity, continuity, and reality. This is all highly appropriate, relevant to the questions and concerns of a Mediterranean historical ecology, even if at times it owes more to literature than to landscape (27). The detail of inquiry at times seems excessive, indulgent, and entirely engaging. The aim of the authors (to challenge simplistic notions of Mediterranean cultural unity and instead to look at the divergent forms of variation, similarity, and the “differences which resemble” throughout prehistoric, ancient, and Medieval times) is sufficient rationale for this study of this “Historian’s Mediterranean” (ch. 2). The biographical essays (530–641) will prove indispensable, nearly comprehensive, and up-to-date for further research into the widest range of questions and problems in Mediterranean ancient and Medieval history, cartography, sailing, travel, geography, literature, and art, but less so for prehistory, anthropology, and archaeological theory.

At various places in their study, Horden and Purcell refer to the “End of the Mediterranean,” by which they mean the end of its study as an intelligible unity, post-Braudel—they do not mean the end of Mediterranean studies. In fact, it is fair to say that no single work published in the last 50 years has done more to revive an awareness of the ancient Mediterranean world as an entity, or to facilitate a “history of” that region. As a prehistorian, I might argue that this work would have been a more satisfactory and holistic enterprise had it been written together with an archaeologist. But to be fair, these are historians and their brief begins only with the first millennium B.C. Had Horden and Purcell attempted to engage another 2,000 years of prehistory, their volume might have proved utterly unwieldy and inaccessible, if not downright contradictory. As the authors note in closing (523), the Mediterranean will always remain an “essentially contested concept,” where definitions are controversial, unities are loose, boundaries are fluid, and continuities are always vague and variable. Perhaps these are the challenges and choices that will characterize not the end of the Mediterranean, but the beginning of post-Mediterranean studies, and of the sea that has always been as enabling as it was corrupting.

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