BOOK REVIEWS

The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History. By PEREGRINE HORDEN and NICHOLAS PURCELL (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000; pp. 761. Pb. £24.99).

THE publication of *The Corrupting Sea* is a notable intellectual event. *Caveat emptor*: it is not an introduction to the Mediterranean, Mediterranean archaeology, or Mediterranean history; nor is it a book to dip into. With the extensive bibliographical essays as the only concession, Horden and Purcell take it for granted that their readers are already well-informed. What they have given us instead is a sustained argument for 'the history of the Mediterranean' as a valid undertaking. It is an argument that to be properly appreciated needs to be read from beginning to end, but the effort is well worthwhile. This is an important book that presents a powerful and original model of Mediterranean history that will be used, debated, and criticized by historians of all periods for a long time to come. Its origins lie, we are told, in the authors' wish to write a Braudel before Braudel, a Braudel for antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is certainly not as accessible as *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, but as a contribution to historical ideas they have succeeded triumphantly.

At the heart of *The Corrupting Sea* is a simple thesis. The Mediterranean is a region of micro-regions. Its fragmented landscape has provided a huge number of niches for human exploitation. At the same time this is a profoundly uncertain environment. Forest fires, earthquakes, plagues of locusts are 'normal' abnormalities, but most fundamentally the climate is unpredictable. One year insufficient rain will bring drought, the next too much will produce floods and landslips. To offset the risks of this environment, humans have needed to exploit the widest range of productive possibilities, and to be prepared to exchange goods and services with other micro-regions. Since Mediterranean micro-regions are extraordinarily diverse, the productive possibilities of each are different, and catastrophe in one will not affect all. So, for example, against the threat of the wheat crop failing, insurance can be found partly in growing other grains such as emmer or millet, but more importantly in producing surpluses in goods that can be exchanged for grain. Such goods will vary from micro-region to micro-region, but the obvious possibilities include animal products, tree crops, minerals, and human labour. The concept of a 'subsistence economy' is a fallacy. All crops can be cash crops or subsistence crops depending on the circumstances of a particular year. Exchange is not a sign of modernity, but of the very essence of survival in the Mediterranean world. Horden and Purcell sum up their Mediterranean under the concepts of 'fragmentation' and 'connectivity': a fragmented world, where risk is managed by connectivity.

These features are obviously not unique to the Mediterranean. Horden and Purcell find no problems with this. They argue first of all that the Mediterranean landscape is exceptional in the degree to which it is fragmented, and because of the sea itself, exceptional in the degree of connectivity. They make the same point with Mediterranean culture. There is little or nothing that is unique to the Mediterranean, but taking the geography of religion and the

concepts of 'honour' and 'shame' as examples, they argue that these phenomena are exceptionally pervasive and deeply rooted here, and at the same time particularly closely related to the challenges of living in a world of interconnected micro-regions. The result is a Mediterranean with fuzzy boundaries, and it is one which does not preclude other constructions. 'Latin Christendom' or the 'Islamic world' would be alternative and compatible ways of constructing the same area, but overall it is a persuasive picture.

The test of the model lies in how it handles change. At one level change is omnipresent in Horden and Purcell's Mediterranean. Mutability is a leitmotif of this book. No two micro-regions are the same. No two years are the same. At one level this a world of Brownian motion: constant in its change. Longer term periodic change, such as the 'Early Medieval Depression', is described in terms of 'intensification' and 'abatement'. The former is a matter of more investment in the landscape in order to get more out; the latter is the reverse, and will usually support a smaller population at a lower level of material culture. Unlike any idea of 'decline and fall', the idea of intensification and abatement is by definition reversible. The Roman empire produced particularly favourable conditions for intensification, but its fall is not an irreversible transition. Early medieval abatement is followed by high medieval intensification. The past will not be recreated, but the fundamental structures remain the same, which is why, for example, they can talk about the colonization projects of fifth-century BC Athens, second-century BC Rome, thirteenth-century AD Boeotia, and seventeenth-century AD Naxos as comparable examples of the same phenomenon.

Such an approach obviously does for a number of traditional landmarks. The very idea of an 'Ancient Economy' is fallacious. So too are proposals to see significant watersheds in the adoption of various technologies or new crops. Out for example goes L. T. White's 'plough revolution' and A. M. Watson's 'Muslim green revolution'. Environmental discontinuities get similar treatment. Pivotal moments turning on climate change, alluviation, deforestation, or over-exploitation in general, are replaced by a 'smooth scale stretching into the distant past' (p. 326). The casualties are too many to list, but include J. R. McNeill's widely admired book, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: An Environmental History* (1992).

Advocates of short term significant change are not going to agree with all of this, but they may take comfort from the fact that Horden and Purcell do at various moments concede that the scale is not always smooth, and the structures not always unchanged. They concede the different status of the modern world where connectivity and environmental impact have moved to altogether higher levels. They also grant significant importance to the development of nation states in the early modern period (p. 276). More fundamentally, the very model of intensification and abatement, in taking the explanation for change away from environmental determinism, puts politics and political structures in the centre of the debate: 'the landscape of the microregion is the landscape of power' (p. 254). The current debate on the 'Feudal Revolution' is essentially on this very issue – see T. N. Bisson, 'The "Feudal Revolution" ', *Past & Present* cxlii (1994), with responses by D. Barthélemy and S. D. White in ibid. clii (1996); by T. Reuter, C. Wickham, ibid. clv (1997), and a reply by Bisson also in ibid. clv (1997). Do political structures change on a smooth scale stretching into the distant past, or is there a place for sudden discontinuities? Does political

change affect the very structure of society, or is this surface froth? *The Corrupting Sea* is at the heart of this argument, and Volume Two is keenly awaited.

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Prince Henry 'the Navigator': A Life. By PETER RUSSELL (New Haven/London: Yale U.P., 2000; pp. xvi+448. £20).

PRINCE Henry (1394–1460) was the great-grandson of Edward III of England and the grandson of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. In 1443 he also became a member of the most noble Order of the Garter, whose robes were brought to him from England by Garter King of Arms and whose coat of arms and motto were carved prominently on the tomb prepared during Henry's lifetime in the royal abbey of Batalha. It is hardly surprising that Henry has been seen in some quarters as an honorary Englishman and his achievements in helping to found the Portuguese overseas empire as a precursor of the English and British empires of later centuries. The fact that he was also first cousin and namesake of England's own hero figure Henry V did nothing to diminish his lustre in English eyes. Consequently there have been several previous biographies of Henry in the English language, notably those of R. H. Major (1868) and C. R. Beazley (1895), both of them republished in the 1960s. The term 'the Navigator' appears to have been first applied to Henry by a German writer in 1842, but it was popularized by writers such as Major and Beazley and has been attached to him ever since. Although it is now realized that Henry personally did not make a single voyage of exploration, Henry 'the Navigator' he has become and remains.

Henry was not of course an Englishman in disguise but a prince of the Portuguese royal house, and it was in Portugal that the lustre of his reputation was first polished and where it has shone most brightly ever since. Prince Henry's contemporary, friend, fellow member of the Order of Christ and court chronicler, Gomes Eannes de Zurara, was the first to give an account of Henry's exploits. As Peter Russell points out, Zurara's aim was 'by dint of a selective approach to the facts when necessary' to 'provide posterity with an exemplary prototype of a great Christian prince' (p. 5). Zurara's *Chronicle of Guinea* 'contains some annexed panegyrical chapters which go well beyond even the demands of exemplary history when they set about establishing the Prince as a paragon of piety and Christian chivalry as well as the genius behind the discoveries whose foresight and determination alone had brought previously unimagined prosperity to Portugal' (p. 6). Prince Henry's reputation has lasted in Portugal down to the present time. In 1960 the Portuguese government marked the fifth centenary of Henry's death, and the then still surviving overseas empire which Henry had helped to create, with a great conference in Lisbon and with a series of sumptuously produced publications of documents and maps recording the history of Portuguese expansion. Ironically, most of the original documents which would have thrown light on Henry's role in that expansion no longer exist, either through the loss of most of the records of his personal chancery or through the destruction by fire of the Portuguese royal archives after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755.