

REVIEW ARTICLE
THE HOLE IN THE DOUGHNUT*

The Corrupting Sea represents a substantial new approach to the history of the Mediterranean. The word 'approach' is deliberately neutral. On the one hand, Horden and Purcell are attempting to formulate and apply a new, 'microecological' methodology to the study of the Mediterranean. Yet describing the book simply as methodology obscures the fact that this methodology entails a major re-conceptualization of the Mediterranean world. At the same time, *The Corrupting Sea* is a historiographical critique of Mediterranean history. These two approaches, the microecological approach and the historiographical critique, are, of course, strictly complementary, and Horden and Purcell make little effort to keep them separate.

Like the sea its subject, the book is complex and difficult to summarize. Indeed, we possess only the first half of the projected two-volume work. The project is vast, and, appropriately enough, it begins by constructing the world it proposes to describe, exploring its boundaries and oppositions. Here there is an almost unnecessary assertion that, in spite of its political disunity in any period but that of the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean world is still a single unit. It is hardly a homogeneous unit, however:

The paradox of the Mediterranean is that the all too-apparent fragmentation can potentially unite the sea and its coastlands in a way far exceeding anything predictable of a continent. The minutely subdivided topography bounded by a vastly ramified complex of seaways constitutes a geographical expression. (P. 24)

The Mediterranean is not a unity of sameness any more than all the planets in our solar system are identical. It is rather a unity of myriad microecologies, all living and breathing at their own unique and particular rhythms.

Given that the Mediterranean is neither a political, cultural, religious, geographical nor climatological unity, what is the point of calling it a unity at all? The answer is provided at the, as it

* Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). 761 pp.

were, 'thalassic' level. Even if the sea did not always function as a channel for long-term relations it still always served as a means both of connection and escape. Like cyberspace, the sea is inherently unpoliceable. It is a huge gaping hole in the centre — a no man's land into which restless and shifty characters can disappear and pop up again. This is the image of the 'corrupting sea' — the hole that gives the doughnut its shape and character.

The second part of the introduction is an examination of the historiography of this world, particularly in the hands of four of its outstanding historians: Rostovtzeff, Pirenne, Goitein — and Braudel, whose concept of the *longue durée* informs the entire book. Although the authors seem frequently to be engaged in a polemic against Braudel, a closer reading reveals an undercurrent of harmony. Like Braudel, the authors define their project as an outline of the ecological principles with which other, event-centred, histories should ideally mesh. These principles are not static; the ecology of the Mediterranean is a fluctuating system that contains within itself both change and chaos. Nevertheless, the authors have a quarrel to pick. Braudel, they observe, claims that Mediterranean peoples are an artefact of their geography; but is not the converse equally the case? Is not Mediterranean geography equally an artefact of the societies that live there, their struggle for survival and for political, religious and cultural dominance? Horden and Purcell reject Braudel's simple perspective in which society and its environment are related as an effect is to its causes. The ecological and the anthropogenic are symbiotic causal agencies; each complements and interacts with the other. While preserving the insights of the Braudelian approach, the intention of Horden and Purcell is thus to restore a sense of human activity as an agency in the Mediterranean.

Instead of Braudel's trichotomy between *histoire événementielle*, *conjunctures* and *longue durée*, they propose a distinction between

history *in* the region, contingently Mediterranean or best-conceived under some other heading, and, on the other hand, history *of* it — history either of the whole Mediterranean or of an aspect of it to which the whole is an indispensable framework. Part of what happens in the Mediterranean is, *in this very particular sense*, not Mediterranean history. But to an understanding of the rest, knowledge of microecologies and their interrelations is, we argue, essential. This 'in/of' distinction affects our presentation of the evidence. (P. 62)

Here the authors seem to be making a distinction between happenings that interact with the environment and those that are

just passing through. In reality, however, since Horden and Purcell are careful not to preclude from the outset any type of historical causation — whether social or ecological — the distinction between ‘history in the region’ and ‘history of it’ is not a typological distinction at all. It is not a distinction *in re*, an ontological distinction between types of phenomena considered as causes and types of phenomena considered as effects. It is rather a delineation of a perspective. By ‘history in the region’ Horden and Purcell are specifying that they regard potentially all events from the perspective of connectivity.

MICROECOLOGIES AND DEFINITE PLACES

The second section pulls the microecologies into closer focus, selecting four ‘definite places’ — the Biqa valley in Lebanon, south Etruria in central Italy, Cyrenaica in Libya, and Melos in the Aegean. Significantly, each of these except the last contains within its boundaries a variety of smaller ecological zones, with patterns of interaction changing over time. Melos, by contrast, is a Mediterranean island, largely eroded, short of water and agriculturally marginal, sustained by its high connectivity with near and distant ports through trade in its one major resource, obsidian. Each of these regions, and Melos in particular, is anything but autarkic. In every case, it is the connectivity, the links to their neighbours by a network of roads and harbours, that proves vital. At the end of the chapter they return to Biqa as an example of the interplay of narrative and environmental history. Neither is comprehensible without the other.

Opposing this picture of fundamental connectivity and interaction is a Mediterranean ideal of autarky — an ideal of subsistence agriculture which has been with us since classical times, and which recurs regularly in modern treatments of the ancient world. Autarky, the authors argue, is no more than wishful thinking, a practice inferred from rhetoric rather than a real or possible condition (p. 115). There follows a discussion of some of the apparent ‘constants’ in Mediterranean history — mountains, pastures and transhumance, the Mediterranean town and its territory. Horden and Purcell endeavour to place each of these constants within their microecological perspective, exposing the relations of connectivity and interdependence linking each. The

ideal of autarky notwithstanding, no microecological region is truly an 'island', self-subsistent and cut off from its neighbours.

Connectivity thus emerges as the principal feature of Mediterranean geography. The long-distance trade of high commerce, with its great shipping lanes subject to politics and economic shifts, exists against the backdrop of *cabotage*, or small-time trading along the immediate shoreline, whose constant presence is captured by a happy metaphor, 'Brownian motion'. High commerce and *cabotage* are linked in a complex and changing pattern, where *cabotage* provides the essential redistribution acting both to mediate the glut and famine characteristic of the Mediterranean's microeconomies as well as conducting a retail trade in the products of long-distance high commerce. This picture contrasts with the primitivist approach of Moses Finley, which lumped all of economic history in the classical world into a minimalist view of a largely self-sufficient society, in which trade is an epiphenomenon practised by or for the elite few. The authors' critique of Finley is new and important, and supported by a large amount of archaeological data. Furthermore, an increasing amount of archaeological work supports the contention that a low level of exchange was maintained throughout the early medieval 'Dark Ages'. This unbroken continuity seems to refute any idea of a clear break between the classical world and the Middle Ages. This introduces another of the book's major themes, the non-existence of revolutions or catastrophes, the absence of clear breaks in the complex interaction between the parts of the Mediterranean whole.

This absence of discontinuity is the theme of the book's third part. It begins with geography: agricultural production, cereal, tree crops, and gardens, the form and function of forests and wetlands, the economics of the fishing industries, and the nature of pastoralism (again). Each is shown to rely on interconnected adaptive strategies, whose form and selection are determined by the historical and economic context, as well as by the social relations of production. Technological changes — whether ploughs, mills, terracing, irrigation techniques, or cultivars — are all examined and rejected as candidates for fundamental turning points in agricultural history. For the authors, change is always amortized by the necessity of diversification in order to control the risk inherent in all Mediterranean subsistence strategies. Diversification, like connectivity, is therefore the real con-

stant, and the interdependence of each single system outweighs the intensification of one or the other of its components. Thus changes in production, demography and exchange are best seen in terms of intensification and abatement, rather than as subject to sharp breaks in continuity.

At this point the human landscape is more clearly defined, with one of the book's few forays into questions of land tenure and the effect of relations of production on productivity. Here the contrast between the *latifundium* and the carefully defined landscape of the colonial allotment is broken down, the latter seen as just as much a manifestation of absentee power as the former. This all-too-short section is followed by further considerations of the contingent nature of technological change, and, predictably, of the contingent and localized effects of catastrophe. Natural disasters — eruptions, earthquakes and floods — occur with depressing regularity but without effects wide enough to be felt everywhere at once. Catastrophes produced by human agency — deforestation and overgrazing — have similarly local and temporary effects. Environmental history is therefore as little affected by catastrophe as by technology. A final chapter turns again to trade and mobility, the mainstays of Mediterranean connectivity. Even in areas seemingly without exchangeable surpluses or commercial treaties with the outside world, redistribution is still the rule. Metals, textiles and slaves move along with agricultural products. Demographic surplus is redistributed as well, by colonization, war or emigration. The mobility of Mediterranean peoples is as constant as that of Mediterranean things.

The fourth section is shorter, dealing with the geography of religion in much the same terms: its relationship to the physical environment (springs, heights, woods and caves), its function as defence against the Mediterranean tendency to catastrophe, and its relationship to human mobility and connectivity through festivals and pilgrimages. Social cohesion is expressed in the gods or saints who are venerated at festivals, social relations in the neutrality of shrines at political boundaries.

The fifth and final section turns to social anthropology, examining in turn the history of Mediterranean anthropology (and the surprising resistance to it from some quarters) and the problems inherent in its practice — the almost inevitable choice of economically marginal groups as objects of study on the grounds that they preserve archaic traits, thus giving the subject an illusory

air of the backward and exotic. Horden and Purcell outline a few well-chosen examples of current anthropological research, each of which clearly locates its subjects in their historical context. The second half of the section examines one of its best-known manifestations, the culture of honour and shame. This paired value is a defining feature of many, if not all, Mediterranean societies, so much so that it is seen as a Mediterranean universal. The authors sketch a properly critical map of the trait, noting that its eastern frontier extends well beyond the Mediterranean world, investigate its complex origins, and assert its relevance to the concept of Mediterranean unity.

The volume concludes with an extensive and exceptionally valuable bibliographical essay, and an appropriately massive bibliography.

This brief summary, while hardly doing justice to the richness of the text, serves to outline its more important theses: the complexity of the microregional ecologies, their interconnectivity, and the effect of these two factors on any political, social or economic history in any period. All social and economic histories, the authors argue, should be squarely placed into the context of relations of production, rather than in transitory technological or environmental changes. The behaviours associated with risk management, dealing with glut and famine, storage and marketing, are all conditioned by social networks. Complexity and sophistication are to be found in abundance in Mediterranean social relations rather than in Mediterranean productive techniques.

The elegant simplicity of these basic propositions, and their relevance to history in the Mediterranean, cannot be denied. With them go a mass of examples, anecdotes and facts. The book provides a pedant's paradise of odd and useful information. Thus we learn that the most expensive cloth in the Roman Mediterranean was made from marine byssus, whose fibre is produced by a rare shellfish (p. 352). The fuel needs of a metallurgical establishment can be calculated as twelve hectares of coppicewood per ton of annual product (p. 184). In the early twentieth century empty amphorae were bartered for manure along the coast of Lebanon (p. 371). And so on. These tales of the odd and exotic are complemented by sharp analyses of historiographical topoi: those on the reception of innovation (pp. 287 ff.), on Finley's minimalism (pp. 146 ff.) and on the

standard view of the Mediterranean countryman (pp. 270 ff.) are just a few of the outstanding sections.

STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE

There are, however, a number of problems with the book as it stands. First, and perhaps most trivial, is the lack of any serious editorial control. Subjects are taken up and discussed, only to re-emerge several chapters later in slightly different forms. To be sure, Horden and Purcell are not writing a thematic description of the Mediterranean world; they are discussing how that world might best be described. Their argument is, in short, historiographical and revisionary rather than straightforwardly historical. They present their material as instances within the texture of their own argument, rather than examples for their own sake:

Our wish to subordinate particular topics to the investigation of large over-arching questions has entailed returning to certain important topics and areas in several different places. Pages on exchange or pastoralism, to give only two examples, will be found dispersed in various chapters. (P. 5)

In other words, if you insist on being so pedestrian as to want a straight account of exchange or pastoralism in the Mediterranean, you are better off going to Braudel who tackles these matters head on. It is only after you have mastered Braudel and the other secondary authors that you will be able to understand the more abstruse issues raised here. At times, the book becomes a metahistorical dissertation in which concrete examples are not adduced for their own sake but rather as instances of proper or deviant historiographical thought. In other places arguments risk disappearing under a mass of detail and erudition. The final, anthropological section seems anomalous in the context of the rest of the book, although volume two (the 'successor tome') may explain its relevance to the whole. However, its theme, Mediterranean honour and shame, is strangely at odds with the economic and topographical focus of the rest of the first volume.

The language defies easy reading, and tends towards the mannered: where we might 'mention', Horden and Purcell 'advert'; processes are 'anthropogene' rather than 'anthropogenic'; and 'asseveration' is a common activity. The authors' edgy sense of annoyance over the mystifications perpetrated in the name of

scholarship is sometimes hard to disentangle from the book's critical arguments. In comparison, Braudel reads like a novel (which of course may be one of the things the authors dislike about it).

CONNECTIVITY, DISCONTINUITIES AND DISEQUILIBRIA

The nub of Horden and Purcell's criticism of Braudel is its over-categorization; Braudel chops up the world into conceptual dichotomies — the city versus the country, the mountains versus the plains, the pastoralists versus the peasants — in which each entity is treated like a discrete and discontinuous Platonic form. Horden and Purcell methodically dissolve every one of these categories, and many others as well. Still, even granting that their criticisms are all well taken, it may still turn out that — at least at the outset — categorization, with all the discontinuities it implies, is the only way we can proceed. The human mind seems to work from the conceptual to the empirical rather than the other way around. The only way we can render the Mediterranean world meaningful is first to render it intelligible in an array of conceptually related categories, only then seeking to discover the empirical reality that lies beneath. It should be emphasized, however, that Horden and Purcell are not endeavouring to deny the existence of discontinuities *per se*. The question is not whether or not discontinuities exist, but whether or not they exist as singularities.

The discontinuities that the authors do accept are of a rather special sort. One way of visualizing them is to use the image of a game of chess, which proceeds as a series of discrete 'events' in which only one piece is moved. Yet at the end of each turn the valency of every other remaining piece will have changed: all the pieces are linked through relations of interdependence. The game is not static, and while a former strategic balance on the chessboard is destroyed with every turn, the underlying connectivity is never broken. The connectivity of Horden and Purcell does not imply a 'continuum of communication [that] was unvariegated and all-embracing' (p. 172) but a complex, even predatory environment, in which imbalances such as deficits in certain microecologies are made up by surpluses in others.

This is a perspective that recalls the 'invisible hand' of Adam Smith, or the equilibrium theory of Talcott Parsons. These are all models that possess notorious difficulties. They are impersonal.

They may explain events on a general level, but when it comes to offering the particular causes of a particular event they are of no help at all. They also entail causes that, by the very way they are defined, can only act *within* the existing system, rather than upon the system itself. In other words, the ‘interactionist’ Mediterranean can hum with the energy of discontinuities, but there is no way that this ‘Brownian motion’, this random movement of molecules, will transform the system itself or force it to evolve. This is the tension that runs through the entire discussion. On the one hand, they are presenting a strong and refreshing view of the way things happen in the Mediterranean. Sometimes, however, the microecological perspective explains things too quickly and too completely for comfort, overriding our strong intuition that there are other causal factors in play.

THE DISSOLUTION OF DISTINCTIONS: CITIES AND PIRACY

Given that the material that Horden and Purcell present is usually embedded in theoretical arguments, it is difficult to extract concrete examples without running the danger of taking them out of context. Nevertheless, some specific examples are needed to illustrate their programme, its advantages and its dangers. Thus we choose, perhaps arbitrarily, the cities and piracy.

Cities

The dissolution of distinctions begins with the city:

For our immediate purposes, indeed, neither route nor town is a particularly helpful category. Both can be ‘dissolved’ into less readily mappable kinds of microecological functioning and interaction. ‘Our microecological model’ encourages us to conceive towns less as separate entities and more as loci of contact or overlap between different ecologies. (P. 100)

Like the special case of ports to which we come later, towns can be seen as ‘epiphenomenal’ to larger ecological purposes. (P. 98)

Or, as they put it near the end of the relevant chapter:

It is therefore the common processes by which microecologies interact, rather than the presumed distinctions between one kind of settlement and another, or one period and another, which should hold the Mediterranean historian’s attention. (P. 122)

There is nothing particularly mysterious about this. Significance is always relative. Thus from some perspectives cities may appear as significant entities while from others they may not. From a meteorological perspective, for example, the distinction

between town and country is not particularly significant; after all, it doesn't matter to a cloud whether it rains on cows or on investment bankers. The question is not whether the town/country distinction can be dissolved, but whether anything useful is achieved in so doing. Frustratingly, Horden and Purcell's starting point is not an explanation as to why a perspective that ignores the city/country dichotomy is fruitful, it is rather an argument that despite the fact that the millennial view of the Mediterranean privileges the city as the bearer of Mediterranean civilization, indeed the hero of the Mediterranean story, the term 'city' defies simple definition (p. 96). The argument at this point seems misleading. There is no denying that on rigidly empirical grounds the term 'city' is undefinable: Malta's 'villages' are far larger and probably more complex than many ancient towns. But what has empirical definability got to do with their argument?

What defines the city, and the Mediterranean city in particular, is the historical continuity of its urbanism, an urbanism that in many ways and in many places survived the fall of the Ancient World and the coming of Islam in the East. This urban discourse, moreover, is typically set in ideal terms; it is less concerned with the shape and size of real cities than with their social functions. The city has an ideal existence: although its physical aspect may change, although the normal processes of birth and death are forever changing its population, a city remains itself as long as it is perceived as a city. This idea of the city includes 'instructions for use' as well, a set of functional purposes, expectations and notions that may lead the city's inhabitants to modify the physical fabric of the city itself. Strip away social memory and the ideal elements in the city's definition and the term indeed becomes indefinable — although size, population density, markets and the provision of services and/or administration all help. None of this historical continuity, none of the conceptual discourse surrounding urbanism, emerges from Horden and Purcell's perspective. From the microecological point of view, the city is simply invisible.

Although their rejection of the city as a useful category seems perverse, the authors make the good point that a number of ideas about trade and economic exchange, power and political hegemony, religion and culture have been unnecessarily bundled up with the idea of the city, indeed with the idea of civilization itself. The received view is that the city is the necessary cause of this

civilization: without the city, the accoutrements of civilization could not exist. The image of the Mediterranean city as the unique *fons et origo* of civilization is not only a myth that flattered Ancient Greek and Roman historians: it is a myth that has proved seductive to moderns as well. The secular tradition of confusing the idea of the city for its reality has led generations of historians into giving the city and its imagined story pride of place in that monumental nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* called historicism. At a deeper level, Horden and Purcell's dissolution of the city represents a root-and-branch attack on historicism of any kind. It is a mark of their authentic radicalism that this is precisely the assumption that Horden and Purcell set out to challenge. The city is not illusory; it is simply unnecessary from their microecological perspective. The bulk of their text is devoted to proving that to explain higher-level phenomena like international trade, political institutions and organized religion it is unnecessary to posit the existence of the city. The roots of these higher phenomena all lie in the simpler, self-organizing patterns of interaction that characterize the natural behaviour of Mediterranean men and women.

Piracy

A phenomenon closely related to the constant presence of *cabotage* is the constant presence of piracy. Pirates, Horden and Purcell argue, are like pastoralists, who assume the role of predators in the imagination of farmers.

Pirates actually flourish in a profound symbiosis with that [settled] world — evidence for piracy, it should hardly need stressing, is also evidence for persistent exchange; and reports of the repeated devastation of coastal settlements, the pirates' other chief target, are signs of resilience, not collapse . . . Raiders need traders upon whom to prey . . . So it will not do to invoke piracy in the Pirenne period or in any other covered by this book as confirmation that basic redistribution had broken down. (P. 157 f.)

Judged from an orthodox point of view piracy and commercial exchange may seem opposed categories, but such a perspective is a comparatively modern one, depending on a number of legal and cultural definitions. However, Horden and Purcell point out that there is nothing in the concept of exchange that implies that it is necessarily equal; from this point of view the fact that we may define certain types of exchange as 'piracy' or 'highway robbery' or 'kidnapping' does not alter this basic fact. Like

traders, pirates are agents of exchange. This is a strong point, underlining the element of predation often present in Mediterranean contexts. Thus from a modern point of view the republic of Amalfi might be defined as a rogue state run by the mafia. Its activities, after all, ranged from commerce to slaving, raiding and piracy. Nevertheless, from the microecological perspective, the Amalfitani were stimulating commercial expansion and general prosperity.

Horde and Purcell's argument here seems to resemble Will Rogers's quip in the 1920s: 'Prohibition is better than no liquor at all'. Given the alternative between piracy and no exchange at all there can be no doubt of its value. Yet piracy is also one of those good things that it is quite possible to have too much of. Given a less dire set of alternatives, for example between piracy and civilized commercial exchange, piracy does not seem such a good thing. Typically, the authors are so keen to establish their final point, that piracy is sometimes a good thing, that they seem to be denying its negative side. The comparison of pastoralists and pirates is thus a bad analogy. It is easy to accept that, for all their hostility, pastoralists and farmers are interdependent. Pastoralism depends on agriculture and vice versa. But does the same symbiosis apply to raiding and trading? Though it is obviously true that 'raiders need traders upon whom to prey', it is hardly so obvious that traders need raiders. This is not to say that trading and raiding do not overlap, or that piracy was not endemic in the Mediterranean. But this hardly justifies claims about the 'profound symbiosis' that unites cut-throats, bandits and pirates to their victims — as if these victims couldn't get along without them.

EVENTS AND THE DISSOLUTION OF PERIODS

The argument against periodization is another consequence of the argument against sharp discontinuities: if we cannot find a precise moment when classical antiquity gives way to the Middle Ages, then no such event actually happened. Again, we are dealing with the empirical definition of a conceptual boundary. In fact, their own model is too closely focused to register large-scale events like major transformations. To use a simile of Edwin Ardener, it is like trying to study the uses of a room by analysing

the vibrations of the pavement.¹ Rather than look at any mono-causal explanation for the transition to the Middle Ages, ‘we might rather envisage the Pirenne period in terms of a complex tangle of abatements’ (p. 154). Sure enough, some traces of trans-marine commerce persist in some places. Sure enough, not every city collapses. But the fact that we cannot pin down a moment when the change takes place does not prove that it never happened, any more than the lack of clear definition for cities proves that they are not useful categories.

Between the third and the end of the seventh century many Roman landscapes disappeared for ever, remaining stubbornly deserted into the modern period. The problem is that they did not do so all at once. Fall-off in settlement of much of central Italy begins early. The coastline of the Maremma, running north of Rome, is one example: intensively exploited by slave estates in the late republic and early empire, its desertion was already noticeable by the third century when the emperor Aurelian proposed the forcible settlement of barbarians in order to bring it back into cultivation.² Survey in North Africa has shown us numerous densely inhabited regions in southern Numidia and Byzacena (south-east Algeria and southern Tunisia) whose subsequent desertion cannot be seen simply in terms of ‘abatement’ and a shift to extensive and pastoral economic patterns. Still densely inhabited in the fifth and sixth centuries, they have been argued to be almost empty of people already by the end of the seventh — and this in the land that made our chief datable fossil, African Red Slip.³ That certain privileged coastal zones could still make, fill and ship amphorae does not change the impression of radical change in this period: a later period than in central Italy, but the same sort of change as there. Where we have evidence we tend to find a few people in most of the old towns, but nothing about most of the settlements would allow us to call them anything but villages. The disappearance across the same period of a large number of classical towns has been artfully resolved into a non-problem by the authors’ dissolution of the very notion of ‘town’

¹ Edwin Ardener, ‘The New Anthropology and its Critics’, *Man*, vi (1971), 451.

² *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, Aurelian, xvii, 2.

³ For example, Søren Dietz, Laila Ladjimi Sebaï and Habib Ben Hassen (eds.), *Africa proconsularis: Regional Studies in the Segermes Valley of Northern Tunisia*, ii (Copenhagen, 1998), 786, showing a drop from a high point of fifty-eight sites occupied in the first half of the sixth century to just three sites still occupied at the time of the Arab conquest.

itself, but the fact remains that the Mediterranean (the whole Mediterranean) that saw Charlemagne crowned in 800 was a very different place from that of the sixth century. It is just that a clear break, a single 'fall', is hard to pin down. It is, for that matter, even harder to pin the blame on the Arab invasions, Pirenne's classic explanation; all the same, a recent assessment of the commerce of Marseille still marks a break almost exactly contemporary with the fall of Carthage in AD 698, a break that is echoed in Rome as well. And of course these are the last two in the room: when they leave, the lights are turned out. The famous Corbie document of 716 notwithstanding (and indeed Loseby argues that this is well-nigh a fantasy in the context of the time) there is every evidence for the collapse of the port of Marseille in the seventh century, and the loss of Rome's interregional contacts at exactly the same time.⁴

We cannot date the break to a specific year or a decade for the whole of the Mediterranean; the transition took place everywhere, but at different times. Still, it was a real transition. The absence of stone buildings and amphorae is indeed a sign that 'something radical was happening to the economy' (p. 160). It is a symptom of a radical change in both production and exchange that cannot be simply reduced to a 'tangle of abatements'.

Horde and Purcell are still dubious, however:

To some extent the historiography of discontinuities has been powered by a sense of intractable differences between periods: transitions from one to the other in such cases have needed to be sufficiently dramatic to account for them. (P. 176)

The conceptual dichotomies that generate a view of Mediterranean history as a succession of periods creates

a tendency of great theoretical force on the part of political and economic historians to divide up this same range of cultures — precisely on the grounds that the means of obtaining and distributing the primary products on which life depends have been radically different in each. (P. 176)

There is, in other words, a tendency to assume that, underlying the succession of historical periods, there must exist a matching succession of productive regimes, one for each period, each of which is discrete and definable. The belief that there exists a one-to-one correspondence between successive historical periods and

⁴ S. T. Loseby, 'Marseille and the Pirenne Thesis II', in Inge Lyse Hansen and Chris Wickham (eds.), *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand* (Leiden, 2000).

underlying productive regimes creates a temptation to consider the historical period as an outward manifestation, or epiphenomenon, of the productive regime — to read, in other words, the proposed succession of periods as the outward manifestation of a succession of economic regimes. This is a tendency, as Horden and Purcell perceive, common to romantics and Marxists alike.

It is precisely this historiographical picture of the succession of traditional historical periods — Antiquity, Dark Ages, . . . Modern Times — forced to march in lock step with a succession of productive regimes which assume the role of their hidden essences that Horden and Purcell find so implausible. Yet it is one thing to reject discontinuities, transitions and dichotomies as the esoteric engines powering historicist schemas, quite another to reject discontinuities per se. Are all 'the turning-points and revolutions familiar from orthodox analysis . . . more apparent than real' (p. 176)? Are the fall of the Roman Empire or the rise of Islam really events of no special significance?

The issue might seem simply this: when are the discontinuities clamorous enough to justify a period change? Yet this turns out to be a false question, for the authors have formulated their notion of discontinuities in such a way that the answer to the question can only be 'never'. Discontinuities have no bearing on historical transitions. Given that their theory of discontinuities produces a system that can only hum and buzz but never evolve, the implication must be that periodization is itself another historicist myth. There are thus only two alternatives. Either we must give up periodization altogether or admit that there exist discontinuities of a very different sort.

THE EMPIRICAL LANDSCAPE AND THE LANDSCAPE OF MEMORY

As lame and self-serving as explanations based on such a vernacular theory of *conjunctures* may sometimes be, they are still explanations within a social space. This is the space that Horden and Purcell must re-appropriate if they wish to identify the vein of human causal agency in a substantial rather than merely formal sense. What microecological interactionism sacrifices is the possibility of confronting the Mediterranean's own categorical knowledge of itself. There are whole aspects of Mediterranean life that are notably missing in these pages — although of course they may appear in volume two. How can the authors discuss the

anthropology of the Mediterranean without kinship, marriage, inheritance or social structure? It is like Mediterranean archaeology without pots or buildings. Central anthropological concerns such as marriage and inheritance are, moreover, in their turn closely related to juridical categories like landownership and rights to usufruct, two other notable omissions in this treatment. They argue that property fragmentation is not 'the malign product of partible inheritance, but a sensible and responsible way of managing intensification in a risky environment' (p. 221). This is an important point, and not without merit, but until they actually consider partible inheritance, or the relationship between fragmentation and the presence or absence of a free market in land, it remains an assertion.⁵

How would this vernacular perspective work? In the fourth part of the book, the authors provide a magnificent example. Here they examine the 'religious landscape' as 'the expression or interpretation, in the context of religion, of whole systems of interaction between humanity and the environment' (p. 410).

The religious response to physical space and to the characteristics of the environment takes the form of a perceptible, often highly conspicuous, punctuation or articulation of the natural scene. Thus the Mediterranean religious landscape has long been conceptualised precisely as a collectivity of numerous, identifiable individual localities or types of localities. (P. 411)

The examples they cite include springs (especially hot springs), wells, river heads, mountain tops, wooded groves, and caves. One might add volcanoes as well. Each of these topological features is conspicuously 'punctuated or articulated' by myths and sacred associations.

What is this 'punctuation and articulation'? A tremendous amount of topological information seems to have been projected on to sacred space. It is a re-inscription on a massive scale. And in being re-inscribed it is translated and transformed as well. This is surely the whole point of the exercise.

Why do they bother? Why should the practical, hard-working people of the Mediterranean interrupt their *cabotage* in order to translate their topological knowledge into flights of mythological fancy, unless, of course, they were getting something out of it,

⁵ The tendency towards fragmentation caused by partible inheritance may be counterbalanced by the sale of the property and the reinvestment of the cash by the heirs. But this is only possible with an active land market. On this tendency in the Roman period, see John Crook, 'Classical Roman Law and the Sale of Land', in M. I. Finley (ed.), *Studies in Roman Property* (Cambridge, 1976), esp. 80 f.

unless, that is, that by re-inscribing their topological knowledge in this manner, they were preserving it in ways that made more sense to them — more socially meaningful and easier to remember? If this is indeed what is behind the re-inscription, then the sacred commentary on the landscape emerges as a large-scale aide-mémoire.

But why, one could ask, is it necessary to translate topology into mythology in order to make it memorable? Is mythology easier to remember than topology? Of course it is. Topological knowledge is empirical and unstructured; myths, by contrast, are stories; they are highly structured and memorable. Their structure is *événementielle*, just like the structure of the vernacular perspective.

The re-inscription into the *événementielle* accomplishes something else as well. When Horden and Purcell note that the re-inscription of topological knowledge into the space of myth and sacred associations helps local people relate themselves to their landscape they are moving in precisely this direction. Sacred landscapes are loci of social memory relating communities to their real or mythological history: ‘The dedication of mountain-tops to Elijah, or the analogy between sacred springs and the River Jordan, cannot be understood without reference to potentially divergent interpretations of the Bible’ (p. 422). Such ‘potentially divergent interpretations’, however, cannot, in their turn, really be brought to the surface until the authors find a way of introducing diachronic variables like social memory and its transmission over time into their account. It is, after all, our intuition that, like individuals, communities and institutions exist over time and are subject to their own sorts of *rites de passage*. It is this perception that leads us to believe these communities and institutions possess a Platonic, non-empirical essence of their own. A positivist demonstration that this essence is fuzzy, ill determined and ephemeral does not help us to understand it, nor demonstrate that it does not exist. *The Corrupting Sea* is strongest where it helps us to conceptualize the many-layered aspect of a given Mediterranean landscape, weakest when it wants us to see these landscapes solely in terms of their interlinked components.

The book is a magnificent work of scholarship conceived and executed on a vast scale. This scale is a source both of its strengths, which are many, and of its weaknesses. It should be read, with care, by every scholar concerned with Mediterranean history. But this is not an easy task.

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