

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Peregrine Horden, Sharon Kinoshita, eds.** *A Companion to Mediterranean History*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. xiii + 482 pp. \$195.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-470-65901-4.

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In the introduction to *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, Peregrine Horden posits: “the Mediterranean as a *region* and not only a stretch of water, a sea and an ensemble of hinterlands—the Mediterranean of the eponymous diet ... is an invention of the nineteenth century” (pp. 2-3). This central issue, whether the Mediterranean exists as a useful analytical category or is just a misleading, romanticized construct that has been self-actualized by the inhabitants, underpins this excellent companion. The twenty-nine essays run temporally from the closing of the Tethys Ocean to form the geographical amalgam of the Mediterranean (Fredric Cheyette, “The Mediterranean Climate”) to the position of the Mediterranean in the globalized world of the aughts (Michael Herzfeld, “Po-Mo Med”) and topically from piracy and slavery (Clifford R. Backman, “Piracy,” and Youval Rotman, “Forms of Slavery”) to visual culture (Cecily J. Hilsdale, “Visual Culture”) to sacred spaces (Maria Couroucli, “Shared Sacred Spaces”). Since Horden and Nicholas Purcell predicted no future for the field of Mediterranean studies in their tome, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000), there has been a renaissance of interest and research, and the editors consider this is “a good moment to take stock” (p. 4). This book serves both to provide a synopsis of the field and to stimulate further research. Thus the companion presents the Mediterranean and its history in three ways: 1) a self-serving set of interconnected discourses that link peoples and places across Plato’s pond; 2) an environmental region where tectonic plates, winds, and water currents collide; and 3) a cultural area connected to, but distinct from, global systems. Within this framework, each author was instructed to write against established cate-

gories and to think comparatively but was free to choose his or her own direction (p. 5).

Comprehensiveness is impossible in a companion of this scope. Further, the preference for the authors to take a comparative position means that the book comes to epitomize the conception of the Mediterranean in *The Corrupting Sea*: a highly fragmented system, consisting of isolated micro-regions, but linked by the Mediterranean itself—a definition that the contributors repeatedly invoke. This edited collection, on the one hand, contains a common definition of the “Mediterranean Sea,” as one would expect for a largely enclosed maritime space. On the other hand, the Mediterranean of human and cultural geography is a mutable, constructed region. Authors argue that “the Mediterranean” extended as far north as Roman Britain (Purcell, “The Ancient Mediterranean”) and as far south as the Niger River basin (Ray Kea, “The Mediterranean and Africa”), or, conversely, that the Mediterranean was an appendage of Asia (Nicholas Doumanis, “The Mediterranean and Asia”) and that it exists only as a pseudo-orientalist, archaizing trope that inhabitants self-actualized in order to compensate for the lack of an industrial economy (e.g., Herzfeld, “Po-Mo Med,” and Sharon Kinoshita, “Mediterranean Literature”).

After the first section, which contains chapters about forming the Mediterranean geologically (Cheyette, “The Mediterranean Climate”), and populating it with plants, animals, and people (Paolo Squatriti, “The Vegetative Mediterranean”), the contributions fall into one of two broad categories. Most of the authors use their topic to

challenge established ideas about periodization or to illustrate a framework. For example, Kinoshita's chapter, "Mediterranean Literature," begins with the question of whether such a category existed. Other chapters err toward a synthesis of scholarship on the topic, not questioning the validity of the Mediterranean as an analytical framework or taking the Mediterranean for granted in that the topic took place there. For instance, Valerie Ranseyer ("Cave Dwelling") provides a fascinating run-down of cave dwelling but never teases out what made troglodytic lifestyle "Mediterranean," and Karla Mallette ("Lingua Franca") gives a synopsis of the pidgin Romance language that existed between 1000 CE and 1800 CE but does not contextualize this language or acknowledge that this phenomenon was not necessarily unique.

*A Companion to Mediterranean History* is an excellent reference for instructors and a useful introduction

to each of the topics. The chapters vary with regard to accessibility; some are quite dense and filled with technical language, jargon, or both. Two issues in particular stand out, though more as quibbles than critiques. First, each chapter has a further reading section but only some lists include annotations, which means that there is some variance in their utility. Second, and more glaringly, the companion contains no maps and few images. The omission reinforces the impression that the Mediterranean is as much a construct as a place, but the chapters oscillate between forms of mental and actual geography and frequently expect the reader to already be intimately familiar with the region. It is also possible to quibble with the inclusion of some narrowly focused chapters at the expense of something broader like "The Mediterranean and Science," but the editors ought to be lauded for this panoramic collection of essays rather than criticized for avoiding the Sisyphean trap of comprehensiveness.

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