

BRIAN A. CATLOS, SHARON KINOSHITA (EDS.), *CAN WE TALK MEDITERRANEAN? CONVERSATIONS ON AN EMERGING FIELD IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN STUDIES*, SPRINGER INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHING – PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, Basingstoke – Cham 2017 (MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVES), XXI + 153 PP., ISBN 9783319557267 (EBK), 9783319557250 (HBK), 9783319857329 (PBK).

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'Mediterranean Studies' are in vogue in the English-speaking world. Universities advertise posts in Mediterranean history, and occasionally literature. The number of journals addressing the history of the Mediterranean increases – including this one. But no one quite agrees what the subject, if it is one, is about. Some scholars, such as the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, even express doubts about whether it is about anything coherent. Braudel's assumptions about the essential unity of the Mediterranean region (very broadly delineated) are challenged by an emphasis on local variation in the writings of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, particularly their massive book *The Corrupting Sea*, published in 2000. So it was a good idea of two of the most active promoters of things Mediterranean to bring together a few experts at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 2012, to discuss the coherence of the subject. This slim volume records not just the papers delivered but the spirited conversations that followed. Since the book is about the coherence of the subject, it is necessary to point out that these conversations are not always coherent in themselves. But that is, in a way, the point: by the end the editors, along with other presenters, have agreed that fuzzy edges serve best, and that we must not be too prescriptive about the nature of 'Mediterranean Studies'.

At the heart of the book is the debate around *The Corrupting Sea*, and Peregrine Horden is present to make his own statements about what that book was trying to achieve. It thus follows on from the collection of essays edited by William Harris, *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2005). Placing *The Corrupting Sea* at the centre of a book about the Middle Ages and the early modern period is at first sight rather odd, since Horden and Purcell were mainly interested in examples from the ancient and early medieval periods. But it does raise the question of the applicability of their model (connectivity, abatement, etc.) to later periods.

Horden gives few clues about the contents of vol. 2 of *The Corrupting Sea*, provisionally entitled *Liquid Continent*, which has always been a problem in judging their undoubtedly extraordinary achievement in vol. 1: to what extent issues such as human agency will be addressed in vol. 2 is left unclear in Horden's comments in *Can We Talk Mediterranean?*

Horden does engage with the position taken in my own *The Great Sea* (Penguin – OUP, London – New York 2011; the bibliographical information given is incorrect), where there is a consistent attempt to challenge Braudel's determinism and to place humans at the centre of the discussion. He is also doubtful whether the history of the Mediterranean should be written, as I do there, as the history of the maritime space plus its islands, shores and ports. But I have always insisted that there are many ways of writing what can claim to be Mediterranean history, even if I have doubts whether an article, on, say, political developments within Greece under the colonels counts nearly as well as one about the development of the trade of Piraeus, ancient or modern. To write a history of the Mediterranean or any other sea that emphasises connections across the sea, commercial, cultural and colonial, thereby placing the maritime space at the forefront, has a distinct advantage: it avoids the dilemma about how far inland historians of the Mediterranean should probe, without denying that the origins of many of the products, people and power-relationships have to be sought in the hinterland. He questions the periodisation suggested in *The Great Sea*, expecting something more unorthodox – but placing the great transformation in the late medieval Mediterranean after the arrival of the Black Death in 1347 rather than after the opening of transatlantic routes in 1492 is surely unorthodox. Indeed, he lays strong emphasis throughout on the need to challenge: almost, one might think, for the sake of it, as if he cannot get the Socratic style of traditional Oxford tutorials out of his head.

Although Horden dominates this little book, there are offerings on the literary history of the Mediterranean, by Sharon Kinoshita, and on early modern art history by Claire Farago. In the obscurely titled but otherwise very thoughtful chapter by Cecily J. Hilsdale, « The Thalassal Optic », Hilsdale makes the powerful point that ascribing particular origins to an object, such as a Fatimid rock-crystal ewer, rather misses the point: we need to ask how that object was seen in Venice, or wherever it arrived – though there is also a danger of pressing her argument so far that something of genuine interest, the way objects were actually made, is pushed off the stage. Farago makes plain the relative lack of a Mediterranean perspective among post-medieval art historians, but she also provides telling criticisms of Hans Belting's assumptions about the role of Arabic optics in the Italian Renaissance, and singles out the writings of Deborah Howard on Venice and the East for special, and surely well-deserved, praise. Kinoshita uses the twelfth-century romance *Cligés* as a fascinating lever into the history not of

Mediterranean literature, but of literature about the Mediterranean. In the space available, it is no surprise that she has to deal with Boccaccio's *Decameron* very quickly, but that book, and the other collections of tales produced in Florence, Naples and elsewhere, are marvellous sources for anyone interested in the mercantile Mediterranean of the late Middle Ages.

This short book is, then, thought-provoking and entertaining, and it provides a helpful overview of where we stand in several areas of scholarship, historical, literary and art historical. It also shows a welcome awareness that there are areas of the Mediterranean that need to be brought more fully into discussion, notably north Africa, though one could add Sardinia and Corsica too. It should serve as the starting-point for new research within and across disciplines.