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Richard C. Hoffmann

An Environmental History of Medieval Europe

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 409 páginas

This book, published as part of the Cambridge University Press 'Medieval Textbooks' series, provides a bold and at times provocative overview of Europe's environmental history between the end of the Roman period and the sixteenth century. Richard Hoffman packs a very great deal into this relatively small volume, something which is both its strength and its weakness.

The author opens with an engaging introductory chapter which explores some of the concepts and models of environmental history and discusses how these might be employed in the context of medieval Europe –here largely equated with Latin Christendom, and excluding the Byzantine world. The principal themes of the book are clearly set out: *environmental influences, attitudes to nature and human impacts on the natural world.* This opening chapter also reviews, briefly but effectively, the sources available for studying these themes and issue. It also deals with the environmental history of Europe before the Middle Ages, discussing with clarity subjects as diverse as post-glacial sea-level change and vegetational history, although with surprisingly little engagement with current debates about the character of the "natural" landscape of western Europe, before the advent of farming –whether closed-canopy woodland or more open, savanna-like landscapes, kept open by grazing herbivores, as argued by the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera (2000). Some other debates are similarly glossed over, and one or two old myths are repeated. The suggestion that *grain, olives and vines* constituted *the ruling trinity of Mediterranean crops since preclassical times*, for example, does not really do justice to the work of Juan Infante-Amate (2012) and others on the relatively late development of large-scale olive farming across much of this region. But to be fair, so much is compressed into the discussion that some simplification is inevitable, and the chapter's clear statement of the legacy inherited by medieval Europeans from both the *classical* and the *barbarian* worlds pro-

vides a useful framework for the chapters that follow.

These unfold along both thematic and chronological lines. Chapter 2 offers a broad overview of ecological, economic and social developments in the period between 400 and 900 which is clear, comprehensive and on the whole successful, although I for one have some reservations about the simple concept of barbarian "monarchies" replacing the Roman Empire. Chapter 3, "Humankind and God's Creation in Medieval Minds", is a discussion of *how medieval people thought about their relationship to God's Creation as they understood it* which it would be difficult to improve upon. Chapter 4 enters more difficult territory, dealing with the expansion of arable land use across Europe between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries (the *cerialisation process*) and the consequent creation of the continent's wide range of "traditional" landscapes. Hoffman makes the important point, already advanced in an English context by Debbie Banham and Ros Faith (2014), which is not referenced, that this development was not simply a function of demographic growth but was also driven by changing dietary preferences. Once again, minor quibbles could be made, especially regarding the extent and character of woodland in various parts of Europe and the chronology of its clearance, the debates surrounding which are insufficiently explored. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with the issue of long-term environmental sustainability of medieval social and economic systems; Chapter 7, interestingly and succinctly, with medieval property rights (including common rights) and the extent to which their character contributed to sustainability, or to ultimate ecological disaster. Hoffman concludes that not only lordly and communal regulation, but increasingly rules and frameworks imposed by nation states, served to limit to a significant extent the over-exploitation of resources.

Chapters 8 and 9 are perhaps the best chapters in the book. Here, Hoffman discusses the causes of the crisis of the fourteenth century, with a brilliant and remarkably clear discussion of what he sees as the autonomous historical actors of pathogenic micro-organisms and climate change. It was, he argues, a combination of the Black Death (accepted as a form of bubonic plague) and the onset of climatic deterioration which were together responsible for the collapse of Europe's population by between 30 and 60 per cent, rather than any simple "Malthusian check" – whether in the form of declining crop yields as cultivation expanded onto ever more marginal land, as in Postan's formulation (1973); or as a more general crisis of resources resulting from rampant population growth, as posited by historians such as Charles Bowlus (1980). As Hoffman argues, drawing in particular on the English research of Bruce Campbell (2011), the documentary evidence suggests that for the most part land productivity held up well in High Medieval Europe. Population fell in the fourteenth century as a consequence of factors essentially unrelated to demographic pressure and environmental degradation.

Hoffman has bravely taken on a formidable task of summary and collation. Does he succeed? For the most part the answer is a firm *yes*, and it is good to see the return of the *grand narrative* to medieval history. This is ground largely vacated by social and economic historians over recent decades, and in a medieval context, as elsewhere, environmental history has stepped into the breach. The particular strength of Hoffman's book is that the *deepening colonization of Europe's natural sphere* is discussed not simply in terms of demography, resources and ecological relations, but also with full regard to social transformations, ideologies, and the mental worlds of our ancestors. All this said, the inevitable simplification required for such an undertaking does tend to lead to the suppression of debate, as already noted, and where the book does focus on particular academic arguments –as, for example, in its discussion of Hardin's old ideas about the *tragedy of the commons*(1968)– it tends to gain in clarity and focus. Other minor quibbles would include the failure of the book to deal sufficiently with the issue of domestic and industrial fuel, something essentially dealt with in a mere six pages in Chapter 6, and the rather poor quality of many of the photographs.

But there are arguably two more fundamental problems with Hoffman's text. The first is its failure to really explore what is meant in this context by words like *nature* and *the natural*. As Hoffman makes clear, medieval Europeans lived in an environment which had been systematically and irretrievably transformed over many thousands of years and was a very long way from pristine nature. In many regions every inch of the environment was exploited in some way, for food, fuel or raw materials. Whether our ancestors thought of managed wood-pastures, for example, as any more *natural* than their corn fields is a moot point. We might do so, but this is arguably a reflection of our steady divorce from direct involvement in land management. It may be unwise to assume our ancestors had similar attitudes. At times, *nature* and *natural* begin to mean almost anything. The second problem concerns one of the book's key arguments –the idea that the disasters of the *dismal fourteenth century* owed little or nothing to the pressure of population on limited resources, and were solely the consequence of the autonomous and random workings of disease and climate change. The argument is well made but is perhaps taken too far. For as Hoffman says, such malign influences have the greatest impact on *weak points* within social and economic systems; and in spite of arguments to the contrary it is hard to believe that such *weak points* did not multiply as population soared, and resources dwindled, in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The idea that rapid population growth had no real influence seems extreme, not least because in the post-medieval period –in England at least– population once again stagnated, and then began to decline, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, just when levels returned to those of the early fourteenth. But this time, revolutions in agriculture and industry, of a kind which would

have been impossible in the Middle Ages, paved the way for sustained, exponential demographic growth.

The very nature of this reviewer's responses should, however, make it clear that although *An Environmental History* is described as a *textbook*, it is in fact far more than that. It is a brilliant and comprehensive overview, an interpretation of a large and complex topic by a scholar with an enviable grasp of European history. It is a magnificent achievement, and is thoroughly recommended for anyone with an interest in this important subject, at whatever level.

Tom Williamson
University of East Anglia

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Josep Colomé, Jordi Planas y Francesc Valls-Junyent (Eds.)
Vinyes, vins i cooperativisme vitivinícola a Catalunya

Barcelona, Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2015, 663 páginas

La vitivinicultura catalana es, sin duda, uno de los temas de la historia agraria española mejor conocidos, gracias a la amplísima bibliografía disponible. Parecería, pues, que un nuevo libro no podría aportar grandes novedades y, sin embargo, el lector que se adentre en este volumen pronto advertirá que no es así. Como señala Llorenç Ferrer en su capítulo, hay numerosos aspectos necesitados de investigación y algunos sobre los que se sabe poco en el estudio de la producción vitivinícola de Cataluña. De hecho, el libro explora cuestiones que habían recibido poca atención, replantea desde postulados metodológicos distintos temas que ya habían sido tratados y dedica, en particular, una atención destacada al desarrollo del cooperativismo en este sector.