

The Mediterranean World: From the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Napoleon.

Monique O'Connell and Eric R. Dursteler.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. xvi + 318 pp. \$34.95.

A stimulating aspect of this overview of Mediterranean history from the fall of the Roman Empire to the campaign of Napoleon in Egypt and Syria coincides with a feature that would arguably make the book less compelling for an expert academic audience: as the two authors, Monique O'Connell and Eric Dursteler, both specialists of Venetian history and in a broader perspective Mediterraneists, state in the preface, "the book is aimed at a . . . general readership" (ix). The volume opens with a handy introduction to the historiographical debate on Mediterranean studies. Here specialists will find all they might expect, in terms of references to past and current debates, that can be summed up in a few familiar names: Braudel, Goitein, Herzfeld, Matvejević, Horden and Purcell, Abulafia, et al. The aim of the authors is to summarize the consequences for history telling of a wider Mediterranean scope, as distinguished from the traditional segmentation along the lines of religious identities and narratives of state formation. As the authors synthetically put it in their preface, "one of the great benefits of Mediterranean history as a field is that it allows us to step outside of traditional frameworks of nation-state and civilizational conflict" (ix).

The volume is composed of twelve chapters, stretching from the "Waning of the Roman Mediterranean" (chapter 1) to the "Waning of the Early Modern Mediterranean" (chapter 12). To the "nonexpert reader" that the authors have in mind, this might already seem a novelty: from a view of the Mediterranean "as an integrated whole," historical continuity and slow transformations blur clear partitions between the Middle Ages and early modernity. Although the book follows a primarily chronological outline, the focus of each chapter is on themes and trends rather than on dates. Major protagonists and events on which traditional historiography places emphasis (kings, sultans, popes, battles, etc.) do not play a dominant role in the structure of the narrative.

Emblematically, each chapter opens with "a brief anecdote" about individuals or events that might appear secondary or marginal, but that have the merit of making

more concrete the contents of each section. And many of these “characters” are figures who “crossed religious, political, and economic borders.” There is a marked emphasis upon economic factors linking communities and individuals across the Mediterranean world (see chapter 3, “Early Medieval Economies and Cultures,” and chapter 6, “Commerce, Conquest, and Travel”). Sections where the authors describe the centers of power around which the Mediterranean found articulation (for instance, chapter 7, “Crisis and Consolidation in State and Society”; and chapter 9, “Mediterranean Empires: Habsburg, Venetian, and Ottoman”) alternate with others centered on interaction across the borders of political entities: in this context, particularly welcome is the attention paid to the Balkans (chapter 10), an area often overlooked by traditional historiography. Climate change and geographical features are also relevant ingredients of the volume.

What emerges from this panning shot is engaging even for a specialist reader and gives a good idea of the present state of the art in the field of Mediterranean studies. Noticeable is the inclusion of large references to material culture and art (a very fine expression is “Renaissance Bazaar,” the title of chapter 8). But ultimately the originality of the volume should be measured against the target set by the authors—that is, a “nonexpert” readership, most likely composed of university students. In fact, it can be read as a textbook reflecting the latest trends in historical research “that move beyond the restrictive parameters of the nation-state” (3). Here also resides the engaged nature of a book whose intended reader is perhaps to be found not only in America, but also in European schools and universities, which sometimes fall short of inclusive narratives and educational material adequate to their present circumstances: it would offer them keys to the understanding of “a multicultural contemporary world concerned with the formation of pluralistic societies” (3). As a marginal criticism, one could say that the book would have benefited from a more extensive use of quotations in the original languages: a history of the Mediterranean should reflect the multilingual nature of that world. This is something that premodern history can teach to our monolingual present.

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