

Book Review: Horden, P. and Purcell, N., *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (London, 2020)

Author(s): Nicholas Thompson

Source: *Midlands Historical Review*, Vol. 4 (2020)

Published: 23/08/2020

URL: <http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/the-boundless-sea>

Book Review: Horden, P. and Purcell, N., *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (London, 2020)

Nicholas Thompson

Unlike this year's Wolfson History Prize Winner *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of Oceans*, *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (hereafter, *Boundless*) focuses on methods of approaching the Mediterranean.¹ *Boundless* is a reflection on *The Corrupting Sea* (hereafter, *Corrupting*) and the developments of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's approach over the last two decades.² In *Corrupting*, Horden and Purcell presented the Mediterranean holistically, discussing prehistory, antiquity, and the Middle Ages through ecological, anthropological, and geographical analyses. In 2001, Brent Shaw admired *Corrupting's* vision of replacing Fernand Braudel's 1949 definitive text on Mediterranean history 'with something better' and *Corrupting's* second volume – discussing climate, disease, demography, and interactions with other regions – remains eagerly awaited.³ In *Boundless*, Horden and Purcell summarise *Corrupting* as providing a focus on 'common ecological denominators' to develop study of the Mediterranean region.⁴

Boundless comprises eleven previously published articles and one new chapter which are loosely grouped in central themes: rebuttal to *Corrupting's* critics (1-3); economy and power (4-7); and water (9-12). Chapter eight, the only previously unpublished article, bridges discussions of economy and water, presenting water mills as economic development

¹ D. Abulafia, *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (London, 2019).

² P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000).

³ B. D. Shaw, 'Challenging Braudel: a new vision of the Mediterranean', *JRA* 14 (2001), 419-453, 419. Referencing F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949).

⁴ P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (London, 2020), vii.

markers. The lack of definition of these themes hampers formation of an overarching argument. Thus, despite edits removing some overlaps and replacing the authorial 'I' with 'we' in cases of solo authorship, the volume feels disjointed.⁵

As most of the chapters have been published previously, their initial purpose does not always align with their intended function in *Boundless*. This may be seen most clearly in chapter one which began *The American Historical Review's* 2006 forum entitled 'Ocean History'.⁶ Kären Wigen introduced its study of maritime regions as one of 'modern cultural constructs' with Horden and Purcell attributing maritime regions' instability to their being 'essentially contested'.⁷ Horden and Purcell use 'seaborne connectivity' to mend this instability, quoting Socrates' observation that Greeks lived 'around the sea like...frogs around a pool' and others lived 'elsewhere in many such places'.⁸ The omission of Wigen's introduction alters the dynamic of the article. With Wigen's introduction, the article presented a chronological starting point for discussing similar cultural constructs in the Atlantic and Pacific. Without it, Horden and Purcell's hopes of refining 'the ways in which we frame a global history' lack the outlook they initially held, now beginning a volume focused on Mediterranean history.⁹

In chapter eight, Horden and Purcell consider 500 to 1000 AD the best period for assessing interactions between Northwest Europe and the Mediterranean as it charts the

⁵ Chapters 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12 are by Horden; 3, 4, 6, 7, and 10 are by Purcell.

⁶ P. Horden and N. Purcell, 'The Mediterranean and 'The New Thalassology'', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 722-40.

⁷ K. Wigen, 'Introduction', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 717-721.

⁸ P. Horden and N. Purcell, 'The Mediterranean and 'The New Thalassology'', *Boundless*, 1-21, 13; Socrates in Plato, *Phaedo* 109b.

⁹ The article preceded A. Games, 'Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities', and M. K. Matsuda, 'The Pacific', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 751-757 and 758-780.

realignment of Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire.¹⁰ They present the Mediterranean during this period as a 'crucible of institutions and techniques that will...come to seem simply European'.¹¹ Horden and Purcell begin by quoting Dr Johnson's remarks about touring sites from antiquity, 'almost all that sets us [Europeans] above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean'.¹² Horden and Purcell temper this with Michael Herzfeld's 2003 concept that Mediterraneanism was equivalent to European orientalism, with Mediterraneans as 'other'.¹³ They consider the Mediterranean a characteristic set of special relationships, unhampered by geographical confines.

The debate between understanding the Mediterranean as innovative, ultimately shaping European developments, and understanding the Mediterranean as 'backward', is summarised as developments being Mediterranean imports or 'endogenous to northern Europe'.¹⁴ This controversy takes up the majority of the chapter, discussed through a literature review of *Corrupting* (2000), Michael McCormick's *Origins of the European Economy* (2001), and Chris Wickham's *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (2005) and *The Inheritance of Rome* (2009).¹⁵ The works are grouped into two viewpoints, firstly that the Mediterranean maintained 'a continued "connectivity"' despite declining trade (*Corrupting*

¹⁰ *Boundless*, 137.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² Dr Johnson, J. Coswell, G. B. Hill (ed.), and L. F. Powell (rev.), *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, (Oxford, 1936), vol. 3, 36, *Boundless*, 136.

¹³ M. Herzfeld, 'Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating', W. V. Harris (ed.), *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2003), 45-63, P. Horden, 'Mediterranean Excuses: Historical Writing on the Mediterranean since Braudel', *History and Anthropology*, 16 (2005), 25-30; *Boundless*, 136.

¹⁴ *Boundless*, 137, 136.

¹⁵ *Corrupting*, *Boundless*, 137-144; McCormick, 144-147; Wickham, 147-149.

and McCormick).¹⁶ Secondly, there was a 'systemic break' in the seventh century separating ancient and medieval economic models (Wickham).¹⁷

Wickham's Marxist approach directs his focus to 'modes of production' from slave to feudal to peasant; the latter, Horden and Purcell suggest, is Wickham's creation.¹⁸ Wickham uses bulk good trade over moderate distances as his economic marker regarding McCormick's marker, long-distance luxury trade, as 'surface gloss'.¹⁹ Horden and Purcell temper Wickham's endogenous understanding of Northwest European economics with Mediterranean agricultural developments.²⁰ They cite Roman bipartite estate management amongst Carolingians and the spread of water mills throughout Europe by Roman soldiers.²¹ Irish and Italian monastic records demonstrate widespread European usage of water mills by the seventh century AD.²² Thus modified, Horden and Purcell repurpose Wickham's arguments as evidence for Mediterranean farming technology causing agrarian intensification in northern Europe which generated wealth and demand for luxuries.²³

The final chapters return to water with Horden's 2002 Linacre Lecture concerning Water Management, originally delivered to an interdisciplinary audience of scientists and arts scholars.²⁴ Chapter eleven hints at Horden and Purcell's ideas for *Corrupting's* sequel. It originally began the 'Framing Saharan Africa' section of McDougall and Scheele's *Saharan*

¹⁶ *Boundless*, 152.

¹⁷ *Boundless*, 150.

¹⁸ *Boundless*, 147-148.

¹⁹ *Boundless*, 148, 149.

²⁰ *Boundless*, 149-152.

²¹ *Boundless*, 150-152.

²² *Boundless*, 152.

²³ *Boundless*, 152.

²⁴ P. Horden, 'Water in Mediterranean History', J. Trottier and P. Slack (eds), *Managing Water Resources Past and Present: The Linacre Lectures 2002* (Oxford, 2004), 35-49.

Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa.²⁵ Horden argues to replace Braudel's argument that the Sahara was 'the second face of the Mediterranean'.²⁶ Instead, Horden contrasts the 'introversion' of the Mediterranean compared with the Sahara's interconnectivity.²⁷ He concludes that better comparisons for Saharan connectivity are interconnected regions like the Great Lakes or Philippine archipelago. Despite noting that Benedetta Rossi (2015) argues for Braudel's model to be reinstated, Horden offers no further defence, hopefully this will come in *Corrupting's* sequel.²⁸ Thus, although suited to a volume discussing Northwest Africa, this chapter clashes with *Boundless'* focus on approaches to Mediterranean history and seems more suited to the frontier-exploring second volume of *Corrupting*. This disconnect highlights *Boundless'* identity crisis between being a collection of essays discussing study of the Mediterranean or *Corrupting's* sequel.

In summary, *Boundless* presents the key points of Horden and Purcell's works of the last two decades in an easily accessible manner. These articles come from a wide range of fields, demonstrating the scope and influence of Horden and Purcell's ideas, and the impact of *Corrupting*. Chapters range from ancient to early modern history, studies of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, archaeology, and social anthropology. It is therefore improbable that readers will be familiar with all topics covered, but this breadth is the book's success. An ancient historian may be interested in chapter six's discussion of ancient maritime taxation but find useful material concerning the development of Mediterranean

²⁵ P. Horden, 'Situations Both Alike?: Connectivity, the Mediterranean, the Sahara', J. McDougall and J. Scheele (eds), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington, IN., 2012), 25-38.

²⁶ J. McDougall and J. Scheele (eds), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington, IN., 2012), 5-6.

²⁷ *Boundless*, 201.

²⁸ B. Rossi, *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Mobility in the Nigerian Sahel, 1800-2000* (Cambridge, 2015); *Boundless*, 205n.52.

economics in chapter five's discussion of 'meshwork' in Mediterranean cities and chapter eight's discourse of agrarian technologies. Many readers would benefit from reading the original publications of the chapters to understand the initial role the articles fulfilled. For example, chapter one focuses on developing a style for approaching maritime ecologies generally because it precedes articles concerning the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Ultimately, *Boundless* whets the reader's appetite for the forthcoming sequel to *Corrupting*, now two decades in the making, which will provide more room for Horden and Purcell's ideas to be explored.

Bibliography

- Abulafia, D., *The Boundless Sea: A Human History of the Oceans* (London, 2019).
- Braudel, F., *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949).
- Coswell, J., Hill, G. B. (ed.), and Powell, L. F. (rev.), *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1936).
- Games, A., 'Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 741-757.
- Herzfeld, M., 'Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating', in Harris, W. V. (ed.), *Rethinking the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2003), 45-63.
- Horden, P., 'Water in Mediterranean History' in Trottier, J. and Slack, P. (eds), *Managing Water Resources Past and Present: The Linacre Lectures 2002* (Oxford, 2004), 35-49.
- Horden, P., 'Mediterranean Excuses: Historical Writing on the Mediterranean since Braudel', *History and Anthropology*, 16 (2005), 25-30.
- Horden, P., 'Situations Both Alike?: Connectivity, the Mediterranean, the Sahara', in J. McDougall and J. Scheele (eds), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington, IN., 2012), 25-38.
- Horden, P. and Purcell, N., *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000).
- Horden, P. and Purcell, N., 'The Mediterranean and 'The New Thalassology'', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 722-40.

- Horden, P. and Purcell, N., *The Boundless Sea: Writing Mediterranean History* (London, 2020), vii.
- Matsuda, M. K., 'The Pacific', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 758-780.
- McCormick, M., *Origins of the European Economy* (Cambridge, 2001).
- McDougall, J. and Scheele, J. (eds), *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington, IN., 2012).
- Plato, *Phaedo* 109b in Emlyn-Jones, C. and Preddy, W. (eds and trans), *Plato: Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Phaedo* (Cambridge, MA., 2017).
- Rossi, B. *From Slavery to Aid: Politics, Labour, and Mobility in the Nigerian Sahel, 1800-2000* (Cambridge, 2015).
- Shaw, B. D., 'Challenging Braudel: a new vision of the Mediterranean', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 14 (2001), 419-453.
- Wickham, C., *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800* (Oxford, 2005).
- Wickham, C., *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London, 2009).
- Wigen, K., 'Introduction', *American Historical Review*, Forum: 'Oceans of History', 111/3 (2006), 717-721.