

Round Table Abstract Proposal
Intermediaries, Middle Grounds, Middle Sea
The Mediterranean Seminar Winter Workshop
UCLA CMRS-Center for Early Global Studies
9-10 February 2024, Los Angeles, CA

30 November 2023

Aaron Stamper
Department of History, Princeton University
astamper@princeton.edu

Submitted to The Mediterranean Seminar

Round Table 3:

How did the geographical character and/or institutional infrastructure that developed in the Mediterranean contribute to particular outcomes in terms of regional engagement and/or cultural, political and/or social evolution?

Abstract:

In 1992, J.R. McNeill lamented the death of Mediterranean mountains. “Their beauty is that of a still-life painting – *nature morte* . . . they are dying villages and sterile mountains.” McNeill sketched a long history of vibrant (and difficult but sustainable) peasant activities along the edges of dense forests – most of which are now gone. The decline of the Mediterranean mountain environment and village life was a *slow* historical process of economic and ecological change (although McNeill ultimately distilled this process to 2-3 centuries). Today, we have the benefit of our own historical vantage point. Scholarship on the Mediterranean over the last 30 years since McNeill’s publication has aptly warned us against overindulgence in environmental determinism. Likewise, we are (or should be) wary of romanticizing a Mediterranean historical landscape of lush forests and ecological harmony, or any sort of loss thereof. The dangers of doing so can be extreme. Environmental fantasies spurred 20th-century terraforming of the Iberian Peninsula and inundation and displacement of entire communities. They also fueled 19th-century French myths of Roman North Africa as a tool for conquest and colonization. The ideas and ideals (often colonial) about the Mediterranean’s environmental past risk obscuring and erasing the voice of those directly tied to the land itself – workers, farmers, native (and Native) communities. My proposal asks us, then, to return to McNeill’s slow changes and expand on their meanings and implications. In this piece, I do so briefly, by considering the two following questions. What can the mountainous regions of the Mediterranean tell us about historical *continuity* as well as change? How did the *relative* isolation provided by massifs, sierras, jibāl operate in shaping cultural, political, and religious developments (alongside McNeill’s economic and ecological) throughout Mediterranean history?