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The Deep Time of the Liquid Continent: The Matter of Troy and the Premodern Mediterranean

ABSTRACT

Attributed to Jacques-Yves Cousteau, the term “Liquid Continent,” aptly characterizes the ecology of the Mediterranean Sea as a body of water that remembers its past: from its geological features to the shipwrecks on its seabed that record to its role in the formation of the cultures of its surrounding landmasses and its islands. Maritime histories of the Mediterranean emphasize the impact of its currents and the seasonal shifts in wind patterns and various flows that facilitate or hinder the direction of travel across this “sea without tides.” Studies of premodern trade and warfare routinely appeal to the agency of Mediterranean hydrology.

This position paper proposes that we explore the contribution of the pre-modern matter of Troy to an ecological imaginary of Mediterranean. Ancient and medieval textual traditions on Troy (Homeric and non-Homeric) treat the Mediterranean as a liquid continent to be traversed with respect, if not awe. To illustrate this premodern conception of the Mediterranean, I will briefly juxtapose the depiction of the Mediterranean in the Homeric epics to the thirteenth-century Latin prose narrative of Guido delle Colonne, the *Historia destructionis Troiae*. Guido had no access to the Homeric epics, and his Troy narrative is the product of the non-Homeric matter of Troy as it circulated in the Medieval Latin West. Despite the two millennia that separate these texts, not to mention the vast differences in culture, religion and text technologies that produced these narratives, both treat the Mediterranean as the critical entity in a non-human history. The premodern matter of Troy offers the modern scholar an ecological vision of the agency of the Mediterranean as a body of water that encompasses the deep time of human embodiment.