

Round Table Abstract Proposal
Mediterranean Ecologies
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Round Table 2:

What perspectives and methodologies can we engage with to develop a new environmental and multi-species history of the Mediterranean?

Abstract: Premodern Communities and the Especially Sensitive Animal

During the 6th century, Christians around the Mediterranean experienced sensorial transcendence inside of basilicas and during processions into the wilderness. Participants in these rites were met with sonic, olfactory, tactile, gustatory, and visual phenomena that brought the sacred and profane together. Peter Brown called such moments “*presencing*” (“*praesentia*”). “In a manner that escaped normal experience, [early Christians] had actually “tasted,” “smelled,” and “drunk” . . . the Wisdom of God with a sensibility undulled by long negligence.” A millennium later, Granadans in southern Spain also participated in ceremonial “moments when the seemingly extinct past and the unimaginably distant future had pressed into the present.” Granada’s community – Muslims, Jews, and Christians – moved in a world of sensorial experiences that were intimately interwoven with built and natural environments in ways that blurred the distinctions between interior and exterior worlds, between physical and spiritual phenomena. For these communities, just as for Christians in the 6th century, the Cartesian thinking “I” did not exist separately from the rest of the world. Nor were their identities *absolutely* defined by Ptolemaic/Khaldunian environments (*climata*). My work in sensory history asks how, then, did premodern communities understand their relation/s to the surrounding environment? In what ways can we describe these relations? Was the surrounding environment – the world itself – “an especially sensitive animal,” (“*mundum esse animal maxime sensitivum*”) – one that interacted with people, as Tommaso Campanella claimed? I propose that we consider non-hierarchical approaches that resist sensorial/spiritual binaries and Cartesian separations in our respective histories of the Mediterranean. One way we might do so is to think of *historical environment* as a verb rather than noun – a “*regioning* . . . a “taking place,” a “happening” of place.” As a result, we may better-avoid the trappings of anachronism and find points of entry to consider the possibilities of a new environmental and multi-species histories of the Mediterranean.