

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Routledge Handbook of Identity and the Environment in the Classical and Medieval Worlds*. Edited by REBECCA FUTO KENNEDY and MOLLY JONES-LEWIS. London: Routledge, 2016. Pp. xiv + 446. Hardcover, \$210.00. ISBN 978-0-415-73805-7.

From the Hippocratic authors' *Airs, Waters, and Places* to Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the intimate connection between humans and their environment has been the subject of intellectual discourse for millennia.<sup>1</sup> Kennedy and Jones-Lewis' edited volume substantially advances the ongoing conversation as it critically examines the ways in which physical and cultural environments were believed to shape identity and ethnicity in the ancient and medieval worlds.

The widespread belief that human differences are rooted in environmental disparities, a nameless theory in historical texts, is termed "environmental determinism" by the editors and formally defined as "the notion that a people's appearance, habits, customs, and health all stem from the land in which that people originates" (2). The volume's twenty-three essays explore various interpretations of environmental determinism within their appropriate cultural and historical contexts. Although the majority of the contributions focus on Greco-Roman antiquity, the geographical scope of the book extends to Asia, where similar philosophies developed concurrently in China, and its temporal scope looks ahead to the European, Jewish, and Arab inheritors of classical thought.

The handbook opens with an Introduction (Kennedy and Jones-Lewis), which acquaints readers with the impetus, scope, and organization of the book. The essays that follow are divided into three parts. Part I, entitled "Ethnic Identity and the Body," is contextual as its chapters discuss theories concerning the connections between landscapes and bodies and the ways in which those theories changed according to time and cultural context. Chapters 1 and 2 are concerned with Greek constructions of identity, namely various environmental explanations of human diversity (Rebecca Futo Kennedy) and the relationship between health

<sup>1</sup> Jared Diamond 1997. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

and environment (Clara Bosak-Schroeder). Chapter 3 (Robert Garland) describes the Greco-Roman concept of ethnic deformity—the belief that subdivisions of the human species can be markedly different from the dominant group (e.g. hybrid creatures, such as centaurs and satyrs, as well humans with anatomical abnormalities, like the Cyclopes and *astomoi* who have holes in their faces instead of mouths). Many of these fantastically deformed groups purportedly trace their origins to the extremities of the known world, suggesting that their abnormalities are evolutionary responses to environmental stimuli. Chapter 4 (Max L. Goldman) considers the degree to which environment is reported to affect physiognomy in the technical handbooks of Pseudo-Aristotle, Polemon, and his epigones, while Chapter 5 (Eran Almagor) provides case studies that describe how health was used as a criterion of ethnic diversity in Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman texts. Jumping ahead chronologically, Chapters 6 and 7 expound upon the understanding of physical and psychological traits in Europe during the later Middle Ages (Claire Weeda), and application of the Greek theory of climate in medieval Jewish thought (Abraham Melamed).

Part II, “Determined and Determining Ethnicity,” presents a series of case studies that explore various ancient and medieval applications of environmental theory, as well as reconciliation strategies employed when the tenets of environmental theory and observed reality do not align. Chapter 8 (Rosie Harman) considers discrepancies in the descriptions of foreign landscapes in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* and their connections to Greek identity, Chapter 9 (Laurence Totelin) discusses local and global medicinal remedies used by the Greco-Romans, and Chapter 10 (Diana Spencer) examines landscapes and heterotopias in Vitruvius. Chapter 11 (Molly Jones-Lewis) examines the tribal identity of the Psylloi, an ethnic group from ancient Libya. It was believed that the Psylloi were not only immune to the poisons of venomous creatures, but they could also repel these creatures and heal the deleterious effects of their bites. These unique abilities were ascribed to the Psylloi because they hailed from the desert, where venomous creatures are found in abundance. The Psylloi capitalized on their reputation by integrating with the Roman medical community and marketing their services to travelers. Chapter 12 (Jared Secord) discusses the tension between the importance of indigeneity and the Greco-Roman penchant for introducing new species to new territories, while Chapter 13 (Kathleen Gibbons) covers ethnic reasoning and astrological discourse in the writings of Origen of Alexandria. The remaining essays, Chapters 14 through 16, address the perceived links between climate and courage (Georgia Irby), identity and awareness in Abraham Ibn Ezra’s astrological thought

(Shlomo Sela), and the political reshaping of Daylamite identity in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic world (Christine Baker).

The third and final part, "Mapping Ethnicity," discusses the impact of ethnic theories on societal worldview, and the ways in which that worldview shifts as "the known world expands and populations move and diversify" (4). Chapters 17 through 19 are concerned with Greek subject matter, such as migration and displacement (Philip Kaplan), the Erechtheion as a monument of Athenian identity (Jacquelyn Clements), and patterns of ethnic evaluation in the writings of Alexander the Great's companions and Megasthenes (Daniela Dueck). Chapter 20 (Joanna Komorowska) explores the connections between geography, ethnicity, and astronomy in the writings of Claudius Ptolemaeus, a Roman Egyptian polymath. Chapter 21 (Maja Kominko) details how Christians in Late Antiquity adapted models of classical ethnography to reflect their religious tenets. Since Christians believed that the human race descended from Adam and Eve, the Greco-Roman belief in the existence of subspecies (e.g. Chapter 3) was in opposition to Christian religious teachings. To remedy this dissonance, Christians designated deviant ethnic groups as monstrous, pagan, or demonic. The remaining chapters are of particular note as Chapter 22 (Shao-yun Yang) describes how environmental determinism was used to justify policies and social structures in ancient China and Chapter 23 (Galia Halpern) discusses how Greco-Roman climate theory influenced a report on India and its "monstrous" races produced by Italian Humanists in the fifteenth century.

Unique not only for its broad geographical and temporal scope, the handbook is also notable for transcending the common understanding of the "barbarian" as "the Other." It advocates movement away from the dichotomous classification of "us vs. them" (or Greek/Roman vs. barbarian), and likewise discourages the application of modern concepts of race and ethnicity to historical cultures that operated within different contextual frameworks. As such, the essays in this book represent the new directions of current scholarship concerning issues of identity and ethnicity in the ancient and medieval worlds. Thus, this collection of engaging and provocative scholarship challenges readers to shed generalizations and over simplifications and to focus instead on the subtle differences in the ways in which ethnic identities were conceived in past.

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