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Joëlle Burnouf and Philippe Leveau, Eds. *Fleuves et marais, une histoire au croisement de la nature et de la culture: Sociétés préindustrielles et milieux fluviaux, lacustres, et palustres: pratiques sociales et hydrosystèmes*. (Archéologie et histoire de l'art, 19). Paris: Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2004. 493 pp. Illustrations, maps. €35.00. ISBN 2-7355-0561-8.

Review by Paolo Squatriti, University of Michigan.

At a conference held in April 2002 outside Aix more than eighty authors and coauthors presented thirty-six papers over the course of three days. Given the stunning mass of data and ideas this transaction involved—the audience must have struggled to keep abreast of the avalanche of information—it was an act of mercy to publish the contributions and give everyone a chance to digest it all at leisure. (“All” includes a paper whose findings about the Roman quarry that supplied stone for the Pont-du-Gard were largely invalidated by flooding in October 2002 and further excavation published in 2003). Inevitably, *Fleuves et marais* is a hefty volume, with its 487 double-columned pages encompassing articles, bibliographies and often hilarious English abstracts. Also inevitably, it is inconsistent in tone, approach, and quality. Yet this is a deeply interesting collection that offers much to readers of different backgrounds. Perhaps ancient historians and archaeologists, particularly those concerned with the Gallic provinces, and French medievalists, will find the book most rewarding. But anyone who studies environmental history (not just of France), or likes to think about landscape change or resource management in “organic economies,” will find value in *Fleuves et marais*. The large section on “hydraulic risk” and how French communities coped with dangerous intersections of land and water will have a special fascination for American readers after 2005. Overall, then, *Fleuves et marais* should have wide appeal as the rich summation of what must have been a frantic and energizing conference.

Neither the editors’ introduction nor their conclusion move much beyond recapitulating the contributors’ content, but Burnouf and Leveau’s texts do identify the themes that the organizers hoped their conference would illuminate. Thus the articles fall into three main sections, each subdivided in turn. *Fleuves et marais* seeks first to discuss the different methodologies available to scholars of human interactions with watery environments. Dry historical sources, mostly medieval charters with some early modern notarial documents and cadastres added, emerge as a point of entry into the subject. Archaeological surveys and excavations, instead, tend to be the preferred tools of the pre-medieval contributors. In this segment of the book the best articles are those of the omnivorous authors who integrated archaeology and palaeoecology with historical and geographical analyses. Hélène Noizet et al. brilliantly investigate the relations of late medieval Tours with the Loire. Philippe Blanchemanche et al. attain equal excellence discussing the river Lez’s delta, south of Montpellier, between prehistoric and early modern times. Here interdisciplinary work and methodological agility reveal the dialectic between hydrological processes and human enterprise in the ongoing redefinition of the territory.

A second section of *Fleuves et marais* groups together articles about wetlands and human use of them. Despite the labeling in the section, biodiversity is much less prominent than traditional concerns like fishing practices, pasturage, milling, and water transport. Paul Benoit et al. here contribute to understanding early modern Paris’ “ecological footprint” with a paper about timber runs from the Morvan. Early modern and modern conflicts over water usages, the focus of three papers, remind us why the word “rival” derives from the Latin for “people who share a river bank”. It is noteworthy that disagreements and appeals to history in order to justify a particular usage were as likely on small erratic torrents as on major bodies of water.

The third major set of papers deals with “hydraulic risk,” or how communities close to rivers, streams, swamps, and other watery places adapted to the probability of flooding (not, it seems, to drought). In this section several papers address modern landscapes, most along the Loire and lower Rhone. Pierre Palu’s essay on the Pyrénées 1750-1920 stands out for its geographical focus and anthropological bent, but also in pinpointing Pyrenean peoples’ awareness of the hydrological dangers their subsistence strategies created: technologies and social sanctions mitigated such dangers and resulted in tolerable landscape stability. Most of the other essays deploy settlement archaeology, aerial photography, and palaeoecological indicators to describe mercurial Languedocian landscapes in Roman times.

Fleuves et marais is thus a heterogeneous work, oddly unbalanced in some ways. Even in the age of the TGV the environmental constraint of distance meant that most participants at the conference came from southern France. The same constraint seems to have induced most researchers to work on waterscapes close to home. In consequence, north and west French waters receive much less attention than central and especially southern ones. This in turn means that classical sites and problematiques get disproportionate space, as northern France has far fewer Roman vestiges. The classical focus might explain why the immediate post-Roman period gets short shrift.

Uneven in its geographical and chronological distribution, *Fleuves et marais* nevertheless reveals how quickly and well French scholarship has learned to think environmentally about the past. In American universities environmental history is a monopoly of Americanists, whose chronologies are foreshortened by the assumption that little happened in the Edenic times before 1492 and whose master narrative requires pristine nature to be destroyed by westward moving rapacious settlers. *Fleuves et marais* tells a story of much longer and more fluctuating interactions: the *longue durée* is a French invention after all. Humans in France have been modifying hydrologies and aquatic ecosystems at least since the Neolithic, it turns out. Yet even in periods of intensified human activity, like the first or thirteenth centuries or early modern era, water regimens, soils, vegetation, and different kinds of animals were agents in human history, not passive backdrops to be demolished. *Fleuves et marais* imparts the valuable lesson that the environmental history of Old Europe is possible, and that it has important implications for the practice of environmental history elsewhere, especially in North America. American environmental historians could benefit from familiarity with such concepts as “anthropisation” or the Latourian “hybrid object” the editors call an “anthroposystème” (p. 486). They permit an escape from the nature/culture dichotomy and the dubious, Romantic notion of “unspoiled nature” dear to modern American environmentalism. (The idea of nature as a humanized entity need not sanction unbridled exploitation of resources: the conference came out of a CNRS research program that seeks “sustainable” relations between people and natural resources). Further, the main finding of *Fleuves et marais*, namely the ongoing dynamism of human-water relations and the constancy of change, is a good antidote to conceptions of ecology and environmental history for which utter stability is the optimal, indeed the natural, condition.

This collection also has some blind spots. Water transport is neglected, perhaps because in dynamic water regimens it leaves few archaeological traces. So is water-borne disease, including malaria, one of the greater “risks” in waterlogged environments. Some topics that do receive attention, like fishing, are not well contextualized. Indeed many of the tightly focused case studies that constitute *Fleuves et marais* seem narrow and provincial, and would have benefited from comparison with other cases, places, and (why not?) countries. Even Elisabeth Zadora-Rio’s breezy gallop through central Asian, Mesopotamian, and other exotic comparative data cannot dispel the sense that too many contributors never peered beyond their micro-region.

If *Fleuves et marais* has surprising omissions, if it is too focused on rivers close to Provence and on water excess (rather than dearth), if it grants excessive coverage to the old debate about state- and

community-organized hydraulics (based on Karl Wittfogel's 1957 *Oriental Despotism* which posited that without massive governmental organization major waterworks were impossible), it is still a valuable book. Its editors strove at an imaginative mixing of disciplinary approaches, with "hard" and "soft" science interwoven in some superbly textured reconstructions of the past. Even the more "disciplinary" papers add to the picture of varied encounters between people and water over the past 4000 years of French history. *Fleuves et marais* works both as a general methodological suggestion about how French (and other) histories of landscape and resource use might look, and as a compendium of specialized, microregional studies that take water seriously as a dynamic historical force.

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