

The Annales School: Bloch's "The Advent and Triumph of the Water Mill" & Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. By Xaq Frohlich.

In "The Advent and Triumph of the Watermill," Marc Bloch challenges the notion of strict technological progression through his examination of the history of the watermill in Europe. After cataloguing evidence of the watermill's existence across vast geographical regions and dating back to the early Roman Empire, Bloch asks the question why didn't widespread use of the windmill take place until the Middle Ages? This is significant in that the adoption of the windmill and its antecedents was viewed as a primary explanation of North Europe's political ascendance at the end of the Middle Ages. Bloch rejects a purely Whiggish explanation—that previously people were too primitive to appreciate the watermill's technological merit—noting both early texts which spoke highly of the labor-liberating potential of the mills as well as the continued existence of cruder handmills up until fairly recently. (I think it is interesting how much Bloch's musings over these seemingly "anachronistic" mills resonates with evolutionary debates.) In order to answer this question, Bloch utilizes the method of the Annales School of studying broad social transformations across long periods of time to examine what sorts of social (and geographical) barriers might have impeded the widespread adoption of the watermill. The existence of readily available slave labor and the absence of flowing water in some regions offered up to such explanations, the former explaining its slow expansion in the Roman Empire and the latter why the watermill was initially a largely Mediterranean region specific device. Bloch's more interesting analysis enters when he discusses the complex interplay between the locals and the landed classes with respect to shared use of watermills and "seigniorial rights", where it is not always in the lower classes' interest to use the more advanced watermill. Bloch's depiction of the watermill's history demonstrates the social dimensions of watermill use, how both advantages and limitations are socially contextual.

Using a similar social historical approach, Fernand Braudel describes the alleged (though not by Braudel) "wax and wan" of the Mediterranean empires in the 16th century. Braudel studies this period at what he considered three layers of its history: 1) "the Mediterranean as a [geographical] unit", 2) "the collective destiny" of the Mediterranean, or the *post-facto* awareness by historians of the Mediterranean's "doomed" political fate, a historical necessity of whose merit Braudel remains unconvinced, and 3) and finally the role of individual versus "structural" forces in shaping history. In the first of these three layers, which I found particularly fascinating as it constitutes a form of environmental history, he describes social dynamics in terms of how they were shaped by the natural landscapes, such as the unruly mountainous regions home to bandits, arguing that the geographical landscape represents a continuity in the Mediterranean history (p. 1239). The final narrative layer of Braudel's work is again the central one of the Annales School. Both Braudel and Bloch chose to minimize, dismiss or ignore the role of individual agent in their narratives. For example, Bloch reveals his non-interest in inventors when he writes: "Perhaps the invention [of the watermill] owes its birth to some individual flash of genius. But effective progress lay in transforming the idea into practical reality and this only took place under the pressure of social forces" (p. 146). Likewise Braudel writes in the conclusions of his book that alongside the broader narratives of history, "the role of the individual and the event necessarily dwindles; it is a mere matter of perspective." the

individual actions that he describes are only for color: “the pieces of flotsam I have combed from the historical ocean and chosen to call ‘events’ are those essentially *ephemeral* yet moving occurrences, the ‘headlines’ of the past.” This is what makes him, and Bloch, a “structuralist”, because he believes, “rightly or wrongly, the long run always wins in the end” (pp. 1243-1244). In addition to discussing the pros and cons of minimalizing individual agent in historical narratives, as I see both authors doing in these texts, I would appreciate any possible elucidation on what Braudel specifically means when he writes: “Nor can I accept, without further evidence, that there was a catastrophic discrepancy between the ‘classic’ conjunctures’ obtaining in northern and southern Europe, discrepancy which if it really existed would have sounded both the death knell of Mediterranean prosperity and the summons to supremacy of the Northerners” (p. 1242). This is clearly referring to Braudel’s second layer of narrative ... is it the same line as Linda Darling’s “Islamic World”?