

Student A:

For me the central questions raised by Braudel's Mediterranean and Bloch's essay on watermills are about whether and how historians can use characteristics of the natural environment to explain the structure of societies and the diffusion of technologies.

On one level, these are empirical questions. Did seasonal changes in weather significantly influence the rhythms of trade and war in the Mediterranean? (Braudel, One.IV.2) To what extent did the "vagaries of nature," that is, the presence or absence of streams and rivers and of seasonal flooding, affect the diffusion of the watermill? (Bloch, 148-149) But they are also methodological questions about how best to integrate environmental and social/economic histories, questions which, at least from these two readings, Bloch and Braudel seem to answer slightly differently. The next two paragraphs are just a sketch of my attempt to get a grip on what their answers are.

Both Bloch and Braudel seem to see the natural environment as structuring history over the *longue durée*, but often being overwhelmed by social, cultural and economic factors on shorter timescales. Early in Bloch's discussion of the watermill, for instance, he points to the absence of rivers and streams as an "important and elementary" reason for the slow diffusion of the technology in many regions of the world (p. 148). But he focuses his paper instead on the structure of society in rural France, with its almost universally watermill-friendly environment. And the explanatory weight of his conclusion rests not on some aspect of the environment, but on "two constraining [socioeconomic] forces": the peasants' obstinate loyalty to traditional methods of milling, and a labor shortage that drove the seigneurial lords to build watermills and restrict the peasants' use of handmills (p. 160). Bloch's goal seems to be to use social factors to explain why technology progresses more slowly than a given environment might permit.

Braudel's approach has been harder for me to grasp, both because of the length and detail of Mediterranean and because of the way the book is divided into three differing parts. But there is an interesting passage near the end of the chapter on seasons (One.IV.2) that addresses the issue. The passage, on "Determinism and economic life," seems to have been added in the revised edition as a counterweight to the deterministic tone of the rest of the chapter, which aims to show how Mediterranean trade, war, and government changed with the seasons. Braudel concludes the section by trying to chart a middle road between environmental determinism and human agency: "[H]uman life responds to the commands of the environment, but also seeks to evade and overcome them, only to be caught in other toils, which as historians, we can reconstruct more or less accurately" (p. 267). This almost political metaphor--the environment as dictator, with humans as its unruly subjects--gives the historian the task of explaining social structure in terms of environmental "laws" (of weather, currents, topography, etc.), while also recognizing that those laws can be broken, though at a cost.