

Histoire des anciennes populations de montagne. Des origines à la modernité. Essai d'histoire comparée

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**Histoire des anciennes
populations de montagne.
Des origines à la
modernité. Essai
d'histoire comparée**

By Fabrice Mouthon. Paris, France:
L'Harmattan, 2011. 389 pp.
€ 34.50. ISBN 978-2-296-56336-0.

As the readers of this journal know well, there has been a remarkable increase in scientific mountain research and international mountain politics in recent decades. Pivotal moments for public awareness were the passing of the "Mountain Chapter" at the UN Conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the designation of 2002 as the International Year of the Mountains, which sparked activities around the globe. This movement was related to the ecological turn of the late 20th century and mainly was led by concerned scientists. For historians, focusing on mountain issues is not self-evident; yet, inspired by their colleagues from geography and other disciplines, there have recently been several attempts to address the history of mountain regions and populations at the global scale.

In his essay of comparative history, the medievalist Fabrice Mouthon of the University of Savoy in France looks at the long period "from the origins to modernity," that is, from the end of the Palaeolithic Period to the eve of the Industrial Revolution. Industrialization set in at different moments in different regions of the world, so that the finishing point of the book ranges from the 18th to the 20th centuries. Given the uneven state of research in the world's scattered and often remote mountain areas, this long period

cannot be treated in a strictly systematic way. Yet, the author is well read and offers a wide range of historical mountain testimonies. They are arranged according to selected key issues, and some are inserted in the main text as boxes, giving the reader the possibility to obtain more immediate access to a particular problem or source.

Chapters 1–4 present the general setting for mountain history: the environmental constraints, the first populations, the transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture, the "taming of the mountains" by mental representations (such as sacralization), and the diverse patterns of settlement and housing. Chapters 5–7 turn to historical land use and economy: agriculture of different intensities; animal husbandry in various forms (nomadism, transhumance, *Alpwirtschaft*); then gathering, hunting, and mining. This includes a view on the changing face of landscapes, for instance, with regard to mountain forests. Chapters 8–9 focus on traffic: the crossing of mountain ranges by lowlanders (individual travellers, military forces, etc), and the interior transport and trade systems of upland regions. Chapters 10–12 deal with society and politics: peasant solidarity and community; mountain peoples against lowland states; and ephemeral and long-term mountain states. In his conclusion, the author stresses the increasing marginality of upland populations in, and through, the general development of civilization for his period up to modernity. When "centers" spread in the lowlands, the highlands became "peripheries."

In my view, there are 2 problematic aspects to this book. First, the personal research experience of the author is rather conspicuous. He is a specialist in the French Alps of the Middle Ages, and his region, leading

to French sources in general being overrepresented, as the author would certainly admit himself. The problem is not so much in this particular "base camp" for the global mountain exploration but in the dominant model it provides. Small, strong peasant communities happened to be prominent in the Western Alps, yet, even in the Eastern (German-speaking) Alps, things were rather different, with middle-sized and large farms and weak communities. Also, the European Alps cover a very small percentage of the global mountain territory. Thus, it might have been appropriate to start with a somewhat greater distance from the author's personal background. Second, the book abounds with examples taken from a great variety of sources, some of them scholarly, others less so. Greater efforts towards source criticism and historical contextualization of the presented texts could have enhanced the standard.

On the whole, however, this book is certainly an important contribution to global mountain research. For readers involved in multifaceted sustainability studies, it can be very helpful to know about the cultural and historical aspects of their respective areas and subjects. It is a strong argument in favor of mountains that they can be considered the Earth's water towers. Yet, it is also important to point to the long-term human heritage of mountain regions. "Deep history," such as reflected in this book, gives these regions a great emotive value.

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