

Book Reviews

Camporesi integrates into his account insights from social and cultural anthropology (not least, Levi-Strauss and Mary Douglas), and maintains a wholesome balance between a concern with the symbolic meaning of the cultural systems of the flesh, food, etc., and, on the other hand, a more materialist account banalistically concerned with what people ate, what made them sick, and what they died of.

What Camporesi shows particularly well is that—at least throughout the Middle Ages and early modern times—attitudes towards the flesh were shared over a social continuum which spread up the scale from popular to ecclesiastical religion, from vernacular folklore (concerned with monsters, the terms of health, the signs of death) right up to the theories and investigations of the learned. The history of medicine and the history of biology are most frequently written as ropes of theory and interpretation stretching back to Aristotle and Hippocrates and forward to today's science. What we less often see are attempts to integrate medico-scientific doctrines (e.g., on generation, on fermentation, on death) within the vernacular culture of their own times. But that is precisely what Camporesi has attempted, suggesting many ways in which popular attitudes towards the body should be seen as part of a continuum which includes the speculations of the philosophers and the experiments of the scientists, and trying to relate (for instance) the Bernardine vision of man as a sack of worms to seventeenth-century natural philosophers peering down their new microscopes for intestinal worms to resolve the spontaneous generation issue.

Not least, rather in the manner of Dulumeau and Mandrou, he suggests that in various important ways, both the post-Tridentine Catholic Church and secular élite culture were attempting, from the seventeenth century, to distance “proper thought” from the vulgar materialism of the people. This is a valuable point. The liberal historiography we took in with our mothers' milk told us that medieval thought was idealistic and other-worldly, and that one of the legacies of the so-called Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century has been the emergence of “materialism”. Camporesi's study—with its obvious affinity here to *Montaillou* or *The cheese and the worms*—shows us just how inadequate such a reading would be.

Camporesi's book, deeply stimulating though it is, is not without its shortcomings. Its method relies heavily upon narrative and evocation; there is little formal analysis, and no systematic presentation of factual material. It is a shame that Camporesi chooses to engage with the existing secondary scholarly material so little. And some of his accounts of popular Italian saint-cults presuppose a familiarity with the vagaries of traditional Italian popular culture which this reviewer, at least, did not possess. Nevertheless, it is a work which should be required reading for any medical historian aware of the need to understand that bodies have their own history. Let us hope it will soon be translated.

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DONALD K. GRAYSON, *The establishment of human antiquity*, New York, Academic Press, 1983, 8vo, pp. xii, 262, illus., [no price stated].

Oddly, given the interest in human origins, few have braved a full historical critique of the subject. Recent reinterpretations of key figures like Lyell and Falconer (by William Bynum and Patrick Boylan) only serve to emphasize this lack. Grayson's aim is not to plug a sociological gap, however, but to provide an “analytic review” for the archaeologist, by way of a sharply defined tunnel history. One wonders, too, whether this approach doesn't serve a double purpose. His wariness of moral-majority Creationism means that, while ostensibly eschewing a science vs. religion paradigm, he nonetheless emphasizes geology's progressive uncoupling from Mosaic chronology, and in its Comtean way this obviously legitimates modern secular palaeoanthropology. As a result, perhaps, his historical categories are partly informed by modern priorities. For example, his later discussion rarely strays outside the palaeo-, archaeo-, and morphological ambit, avoiding the deeper complications of Biblical exegesis, philology, or the antiquarian pursuit of ancient civilization, although these remained of great contemporary concern.

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The early chapters, beginning with the ubiquitous Bishop Ussher, are largely synoptic. In later ones, Grayson resorts to a finer-resolution microscope. He rounds his sights on the crucial 1810–60 period—bounded by Cuvier’s announcement of fossil “time markers”, and Boucher de Perthes’s forging of a common geo-archaeological context for fixing mankind’s antediluvial age. The book comes alive with Grayson’s discussion of cave palaeontology, and his technical mastery is evident in his treatment of the vexed question of man’s contemporaneity with the mammoth (the book’s leitmotif). His informed account illustrates just how complex the interpretation of cave fossils really was. Cuvier dismissed the Gailenreuth cave humans, Frere’s stone implements, Guadeloupe man, and Scholtheim’s human-rhino cavern assortment; Lyell and Buckland redated Schmerling’s “Ethiopian” Engis skull (causing a loss of popular interest which forced Schmerling to remainder his *Recherches* as wrapping-paper!); even Darwin rubbished Boucher’s book. The volte-face occurred during that extraordinary period when Pengelly’s Brixham Cave findings in 1858 sent specialists scurrying across the Channel to re-examine Boucher’s Abbéville site. Here, one senses that a contextual study of the Falconer-Prestwich group which invaded France and turned the chronological tables would provide welcome light on why specialists now had little trouble accepting what was anathema to older savants, a human antiquity measured in tens of millennia. This, of course, wasn’t Grayson’s brief, but it would help to underscore the data-based “resolution” of the antiquity debate that he has so well documented.

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GRAHAM TWIGG, *The Black Death: a biological reappraisal*, London, Batsford, 1984, 8vo, pp. 254, illus., £14.95.

Among the many reasons for the lasting attractions of historical research into earlier periods are the uncertainties which, due to poor or missing documentation, can never be entirely removed and hence continue to provide endless stimulation for informed discussion. There are few areas where this is as self-evident as in that of transmissible diseases. The farther back one goes, the more sketchy and inadequate are the descriptions of epidemics and epizootics left for posterity; often, the authors were laymen, and in most cases clinical descriptions remained less than adequate until well into the eighteenth century. The difficulties are compounded by the reproductive behaviour of micro-organisms; multiplying so much faster than higher forms of life, the number of generations within a given span of time is very high, and the possibilities of mutations and changes in species and sub-species are infinitely rich.

The great plague that swept over Europe from the east beginning in 1347–48, and which came to be known as the Black Death, had long been identified, by historians and medical authorities alike, as bubonic, and probably also pneumonic, plague, although there were inconsistencies in some of the records. Now the zoologist, Graham Twigg, whose special interests include the biology of rats and certain rodent-borne diseases, has written a book in order to persuade us otherwise. He strongly believes he has reasons for dismissing the case for bubonic plague, and suggests anthrax as an alternative. He has examined at length the biological behaviour patterns and the optimum conditions for the existence of the delicately balanced relationships between a number of species of rodents and fleas which are known today as carriers of the plague organism *Yersinia pestis*, first identified, independently, by Kitasato and by Yersin in Hong Kong in 1894.

Twigg examines the reactions of rats and of fleas to prevailing temperatures and other climatic factors and to architectural conditions in recent times, and compares them rather indiscriminately with those of past centuries. Even the wealth of detailed information on rats and associated rodent species, and incidentally on the many different arthropods which may transmit plague, only serves to emphasize the unpredictability of many of the factors which make up the complex fabric of plague epidemics, and consequently the uncertainty of conclusions concerning their presence and behaviour in the fourteenth century. It is not easy to