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# An Environmental History of Medieval Europe

Richard C. Hoffmann

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# AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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RICHARD C. HOFFMANN



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521700375](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521700375)

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Hoffmann, Richard C. (Richard Charles), 1943–

An environmental history of medieval Europe / by Richard C. Hoffmann.  
pages cm. – (Cambridge medieval textbooks)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-521-87696-4 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-70037-5 (paperback)

1. Human ecology – Europe – History – To 1500. 2. Nature – Effect of human beings on – Europe – History – To 1500. 3. Social ecology – Europe – History – To 1500. 4. Europe – Environmental conditions – History – To 1500. 5. Europe – Social conditions – To 1492. 6. Civilization, Medieval. I. Title.

GF540.H64 2013

304.2094/0902-dc23

2013035617

ISBN 978-0-521-87696-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-70037-5 Paperback

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## An Environmental History of Medieval Europe

How did medieval Europeans use and change their environments, think about the natural world, and try to handle the natural forces affecting their lives? This groundbreaking environmental history examines medieval relationships with the natural world from the perspective of social ecology, viewing human society as a hybrid of the cultural and the natural. Richard Hoffmann's interdisciplinary approach sheds important light on such central topics in medieval history as the decline of Rome, religious doctrine, urbanization and technology, as well as key environmental themes, among them energy use, sustainability, disease and climate change. Revealing the role of natural forces in events previously seen as purely human, the book explores issues including the treatment of animals, the 'tragedy of the commons', agricultural clearances and agrarian economies. By introducing medieval history in the context of social ecology, it brings the natural world into historiography as an agent and object of history itself.

RICHARD C. HOFFMANN is Professor Emeritus and Senior Scholar in the Department of History, York University, Canada. As a pioneer in the environmental history of pre-industrial Europe, he is widely known for his contributions to medieval studies, environmental studies and historic fisheries.

## Cambridge Medieval Textbooks

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## PREFACE

Some might judge foolhardy the very notion of approaching medieval European history as if nature mattered. Yet the historiographic space between J. Donald Hughes's *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (1994), and John Richards's *The Unending Frontier: an Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (2003) calls for at least a temporary span cobbled together by one familiar with the hazards of practising and teaching medieval and environmental history alike. The construction grew from original research and writing in these fields, but equally from trying to assimilate books, articles, conference papers, and conversations of colleagues in many disciplines into topics for discussion in graduate and senior seminars and eventually into lectures for undergraduates in History at York University, Toronto. Performances of able students at all levels showed what more could be made of these materials and the struggles of others indicated where approaches had to be rethought. Thus reconsidered and revised, the lectures became the core of this textbook, the substance of which was completed in September 2012.

The book is perhaps wishfully directed at two audiences, students of the Middle Ages and students of environmental history from both historical and palaeoscientific backgrounds. It therefore surely says some things one set of readers may find too elementary and another set still too alien, only to incite reversed opinions elsewhere. Patience can be a difficult virtue for readers and author alike, but an interdisciplinary enterprise must bring diverse expertise into a shared space where all can contribute. The book explores topics that are defined by general medieval history – the decline of Rome, the role

of religious doctrine, the problem of the fourteenth century – by economic and social research with clear ecological implications – agricultural clearances and agrarian economics, tenurial rights, technology, urbanization – and by environmental studies – social metabolism, climate change, sustainability, the ‘tragedy of the commons’, biodiversity, the roots of today’s environmental crisis. Evidence and findings rest on administrative, legal, religious, and literary texts; on artistic, practical, and discarded material objects; and on biological, geological, pedological, atmospheric, genetic, and chemical data sets. Coverage aspires to be inclusive, summoning up examples from various lands of western Christendom and, where appropriate, observing differences as closely as commonalities. Space and ignorance, however, thwart this ambition, leaving ample opportunity for more expert scholars and scientists to correct errors, omissions, and misconceptions. I anticipate the better-informed will take issue with assertions here made and within a brief span in academic time undertake to replace this initial assemblage of medieval environmental tales with more definitive syntheses and elegant recognition of diversities.

That what follows bears any historical weight or analytical substance is in no small measure due to the generous information, ideas, and criticisms of Ellen Arnold, Cristina Arrigoni Martelli, Steven Bednarski, Connie Berman, Steve Carpenter, Tom Cohen, Petra van Dam, Dagomar Degroot, Anton Eryvnyck, Piotr Górecki, Barbara Hanawalt, Bernd Herrmann, Stuart Jenks, Suzanne Jenks, Richard Keyser, Lisa Kiser, Tim Newfield, Kathy Pearson, Christie Peters, Tom Prinsen, Alasdair Ross, Linnéa S. Rowlatt, Martin Schmidt, Bradley Skopyk, Paolo Squatriti, Peter Szabo, Vickie Szabo, Richard Unger, Andrew Watson, and others I blush to have neglected. Elements of the published book were possible with help from Terence Barry, Peter Durrant, Della Hooke, Tim LeGoff, Rosa Orlandini, Oliver Rackham, Rosemary Ryan, William TeBrake, and Iain Wallace. Carolyn King has again turned my inchoate sketches and ideas into effective original maps and diagrams. At Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson initiated our discussions and sold to his colleagues my approach to the topic, Elizabeth Friend-Smith patiently shepherded author and manuscript through its drafts, and Chloe Dawson helped resolve many practical problems. I am grateful to all.

That I think of myself as an environmental historian is due to the example and suasion of my late colleague Elinor Melville, who remains deeply missed. That I even pretend to think as an environmental historian I owe to the example, instruction, and unfailing collegial support of Verena Winiwarter. My appreciation of the simultaneous strength and fragility of natural forces and the need for humility in approaching them was taught by time in and on waters great and small and by sharing the ways of a gardener, Ellen, who has for nearly a half-century mostly managed to keep my feet on the ground.

What is mistaken in this book is my own doing. I hope others will take up the questions it tries to raise, mend its faults, and enrich our understanding with their own better-founded answers to the dynamic interactions of medieval Europeans and their natural world.

King City, Ontario



Frontispiece: Nature and culture at Waterford, Ireland, 1372



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