

ELLEN SEMPLE'S GEOGRAPHY

of the Mediterranean Region: The Biography of a Book

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ABSTRACT

Ellen Churchill Semple's last book, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region: Its Relation to Ancient History*, is the least known of her three volumes on human geography. Its neglect by geographers, beginning not long after its publication, was accelerated during the 1930s. Reasons include the decline of interest in classical geography as a part of geography's task, the development of small-scale research methods and changing disciplinary objectives, and the designation of historical geography as either a responsibility of historians or, at most, permitting only cross-sections of the geographies of specific pasts, with little attention to historical processes.

This essay examines Semple's Mediterranean project as a whole, including an analysis of her earlier Mediterranean work. It argues for the significance of the changing methods and emphases revealed in her late Mediterranean publications and book chapters and traces her struggle to complete the final product. It also traces the changing relations within American geography as later scholars, several of them women, have reassessed Semple's late work. The article closes with an argument: why today's geographers should read *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*, as a model of how to write better geography.

Key words: Harlan H. Barrows, history of American geography, Mediterranean region, Ellen Churchill Semple

It was her best book, and unfortunately neglected.

-Samuel Van Valkenburg

Ellen Churchill Semple (1863-1932) was a prolific author, researcher, and faculty member in two major American geography programs during the first third of the twentieth century. Through her teaching, lecturing, and publications, she became an important figure in the early development of American human geography (Colby 1933; Conzen, Rumney and Wynn, 1993; Bushong 1999). In addition to her significant articles, notably "The Anglo-Saxons of the

Kentucky Mountains" (1901), Semple published three major books: *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* (1903), *Influences of Geographic Environment* (1911), and *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region* (1931). The second volume was the most influential, and its varied reception in the English-speaking geography world has been extensively studied in a thoughtful volume by Innes Keighren (Keighren 2010).

The underlying question of this essay is this: what was the twenty-year effort that led to Semple's Mediterranean book, and how does it differ, in kind or in degree, from her earlier publications? In these later years, as we shall see, Semple moved from her earlier work in significant ways. In a sense, we need to understand that there are three kinds of chapters within the covers of the Mediterranean book. To understand the book, one must ignore the chapter numbers and, in effect, see the book as three books, each with a differing intellectual approach. Her late essays and book chapters show little of the "environmental influence" trope that is usually ascribed to her work.

Semple's subtitle for the Mediterranean book, "Its Relation to Ancient History," is also somewhat misleading. Much in the late-written chapters treats of prehistoric human activity, for example. In other places Semple stretches the category of "ancient history" to include events as late as the First World War. The later chapters of the Mediterranean book show an analytic historical mode, which subtly changes the form of Semple's geography.

Why should we read Semple's last book? Why does it matter? Semple's Mediterranean book is less a pendant to *Influences* than a record of Semple's gradually shifting concept of what human geography ought to be, i.e., a geography that incorporates genesis and human-directed environmental change. Semple's articles and chapters increasingly show the power of human activity to shape and create a humanized environment. Aside from that, her scholarship (even if somewhat dated now), has a style and a clarity of writing that makes the book still worth the reading.

Semple's Mediterranean project, if studied on its own terms, provides in its late phases a substantive work that suggests a different path for historical geography than the restricted one that prevailed for three decades after her death. The newer path that she outlined in her later Clark years might have provided human geographers with methods and perspectives that only began to take root in historical geography in the 1960s. Unfortunately, as Allen Bushong has put it, "her geography colleagues, with few exceptions, ignored the work" (Bushong 1999, 637-638).

The Road to Semple's Last Book

That in Semple's early work in human geography, or, as she expressed it, anthropogeography, she embraced the idea of "environmental influence" as a guiding principle is beyond doubt. Nor is her long-term commitment to the classical world. (Semple had taught ancient Mediterranean history and its geographic context in her sister's school in Louisville, KY.) Both appear in the first paragraph of her 1899 study of the Hanse towns of northern Europe. Here Semple argued that the influence of enclosed sea basins favored the emergence of maritime trade and naval power. Land-locked bodies of water, indented coastlines, and numerous islands assisted the early development of maritime trade.

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The Mediterranean's eastern sea basin provided an ideal set of conditions that developed Phoenician seamen, their successors, the Greeks, in the same area, and the Romans further west. Rome's maritime power ended with the fall of the Roman empire, but successor city-states in Italy - Genoa, Pisa and Venice - took the places of the earlier groups. All of them were indebted to the development of "capacious, protected" harbors. The happy situation of being at the melting-pot of a continental land route and a sea route were significant elements that aided their commerce and their conquests (Semple, 1899).

A more full-throated environmental explanation occurs in her address, "Emphasis Upon Anthropogeography in Schools," given at the 8th International Geographical Congress, held in Washington, DC in 1904. In it, Semple argues that "geography is the study of the land and its effect upon its people," but that the land is understood "only when studied in the light of its influence upon its inhabitants," such as "the climate which determines" and "the rainfall and soil which control." In these, geography reveals "the persistent, potent forces back of political bodies and legislative enactments...." (Semple 1905, 657).

Quoting Friedrich Ratzel, Semple contended that "the most important fact in the history of Greece was its location at the threshold of the Orient," an influence she developed later in *Influences of Geographic Environment*. Semple argues further that "by comparison of different periods... the same geographic factor is seen to operate continuously, though under new aspects." This point also foreshadows her argument in *Influences*. Among her examples are Greece, from an ancient maritime power to the carrying trade of the present. She ends with a paean of praise for environmental influences: "...geographic forces are stable, persistent; they operate from day to day and from century to century. They constitute the soil in which empires are rooted, and they rise in the sap of the nation" (Semple 1905, 662-663).

If one wishes to characterize Semple as a "geographical determinist," the 1904 paper could certainly support that label. Human initiative and culture change are in short supply. But is such a conclusion, this "scarlet letter" hung around Semple's neck for decades, and endlessly repeated in the lore of the discipline, unchallengeable?

Certainly some, though far from all, of her next book, *Influences of Geographic Environment*, and the articles leading up to some of its chapters, seem to confirm this. This is especially true of the opening chapter, "The Operation of Geographic Factors in History." But a number of the more substantive chapters, such as Chapter 15, "Mountain Barriers and Their Passes," do not. In these, one sees the beginnings of the historical analysis of the *Geography of the Mediterranean Region*. Man is seen as part of "the mobile envelope of the earth." While mountains may "retard, arrest, or deflect" historical movement, that same human movement "seeks the valleys and passes, where communication with the lowlands is easiest" (Semple 1911, 521).

Transition slopes have "human value" and "habitability" (Semple 1911, 524). Mountain passes have facilitated migration of people throughout history: "Nowhere does history repeat itself so monotonously, yet so interestingly as in these mountain gates" (Semple 1911, 545). This is human action, a function of the historian, not the fixed presumption of the "geographical determinist."

This paper is not intended as one for Semple's second book. But it needs to be said that the usual dismissal of it as "determinist" is somewhat misleading. One would have to be extremely myopic to read Chapter 5, "Geographical Location" and Chapter 6, "Geographical Area," to find any trace of environmental determinism. Nor can one dismiss entirely Semple's (1911, vii) own Preface, in which she writes "the writer speaks of geographic factors and influences, shuns the word geographic determinant, and speaks with extreme caution of geographic control."

The Making of the Mediterranean Book

We now turn to the history of the creation of the Mediterranean book itself. How it came together requires a complex analysis. In the process, this late work resulted in something Semple herself might not have fully realized when she began it. As we shall see, the book grew and changed in the process of writing its later segments. As a result, it became something other than what either her contemporaries or later historians of geography have believed it to be.

In a letter to John K. Wright of the American Geographical Society, Semple looked back at *Influences*. (Apparently there was some interest at the Society in republishing it, with a new preface by the author.) In reflecting on it, Semple wrote that she had "no particular hopes or ambitions for the book....My sole aim was to do it well....When the book was finally out I started around the world and did not hear anything about it for eight months. I was content not to. I had worked... to the best of my ability, and was not greatly concerned about the result. A curious state of mind, perhaps, but that's me" (E. C. Semple to J. K. Wright, 1 February 1922, American Geographical Society Archives, University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee).

One can read two things into this note. One is, if this recollection of Semple's state of mind eleven years before is accurate, when *Influences* was out, it was in a sense over and done with, much as her *American History and Its Geographic Conditions* was over and done with once it was out in 1903. Second, Semple apparently by then had no interest in writing a book that would be simply a regional example of the ideas that had already appeared in systematic form in *Influences*. Rather, the gap had put *Influences* to one side.

In her trip around the world, in 1911-1912, Semple and her travelling companions (both Vassar College friends) had spent their time in East and Southeast Asia. In their lengthy stay in Japan, where she also had friends, two of them Vassar college-mates, she gathered material for what later became two significant articles, one on Japanese agriculture and the other on Japanese colonial methods (Adams, 2014). After visiting India, she and her friends arrived in Greece early in 1912.

Here they engaged a car and driver. Since it was only one of two in the country (the other was owned by the King), they were treated with great respect. They travelled as far north as the Vale of Tempe on the Turkish border and returned to Athens on the route Xerxes and his men had taken on the way to what became the Battle of Thermopylae. (Their driver was less concerned with Greek history than with the effect of the hot springs on his tires.) They also visited Sparta and the Peloponnese. All the way, Semple had made notes on stock raising, agriculture, and ancient commercial routes, particularly pass routes, all of which were incorporated into her journal articles and the resulting book (*Worcester Telegram*, 6 July

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1921, "Anthropo-geographer is title of woman giving Clark summer course." Clark University Scrapbooks; James, P.E., W.A. Bladen and P.P. Karan 1993).

From Greece, the party moved through the western Balkans to Italy and Switzerland, then north and west to Germany, France, the Low Countries and Scandinavia. Semple then spent several months in Great Britain. Here she lectured to both popular and scholarly audiences, including at Oxford University, the Royal Geographical Society, and the four branches of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, told in a fascinating chapter in Innes Keighren's important book on the reception of *Influences*. Semple returned to the United States in December 1912, wrote her two papers on Japan, and taught her anthropogeography course at the University of Chicago in the Spring quarter of 1914. She also began work on her first Mediterranean paper, "The Barrier Boundary of the Mediterranean Basin and its Northern Breaches as Factors in History." She read this paper at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in December 1914. It was published in the Association's *Annals* the following year (Colby 1933, 234-235; James, Bladen and Karan 1983, 41-42; Keighren 2010, 97-1010).

Semple had a deep interest in mountains and mountain passes. Chapter 15 in *Influences* is titled "Mountain Barriers and their Passes," and is followed (Chap. 16) by one titled "Influences of a Mountain Environment." Semple allocated four chapters in her Mediterranean book to "The Barrier Boundaries of the Mediterranean Region." The one on "The Northern Barrier Boundary and its Breaches" is most clearly related to her 1915 published paper. We can see from it that there is a difference between the earlier ones – "influences of environment" is replaced by "factors in history," to put it simply. Comparison of the chapters of 1911 and the paper of 1915 suggests the beginnings of a shift of emphasis in Semple's approach. The later essays place more emphasis on the activity in the breaches, the enormous exchange of materials and products through them, and their role in the spread of Mediterranean culture.

Seemingly her experience of having been driven through and studying the western Balkans pushed her into new realities. Indeed, in a footnote in the 1915 article, she wrote that her understanding of the Balkan barrier and passes was "based upon previous observations during a motor trip through Dalmatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro in 1912." In the spring of 1922, Semple went to Italy for six months, specifically to study the Abruzzi Range, the Brenner Pass, and the Swiss Alps. Again, she made frequent stops and took copious notes (Semple 1915, 29; *Boston Transcript*, 10 March 1922. Miss Semple, only woman member of faculty, to visit Italy. Clark University Scrapbooks).

While still affiliated with the University of Chicago, Semple completed five additional articles on Mediterranean subjects. These were "Pirate Coasts of the Mediterranean Sea" (published in the *Geographical Review* in 1916); "Climatic and Geographical Influences on Ancient Mediterranean Forests and the Lumber Trade" (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1919); "The Ancient Piedmont Route of Northern Mesopotamia" (*Geographical Review*, 1919, - a version of a paper she had written for "The Inquiry"); and "Geographical Factors in the Ancient Mediterranean Grain Trade" (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1921). All of these became chapters in the Mediterranean book. In addition, she wrote a lengthy summary of Ewald Banse's *Die Turkei: Eine Moderne Geographie*, 3rd ed., 1919 (*Geographical Review*, 1921), which she frequently cited in her later volume (Colby 1933, 238-240).

Wallace Atwood had been a colleague of Semple as a member of the closely allied geology department at Chicago. Atwood had moved to Harvard University's geology and geography department in 1913 as Professor of Physiography. In 1920 he had been elected President of Clark University, tasked with establishing a major department of geography there, beginning in 1921. He persuaded Semple, then President of the Association of American Geographers, to join him as the first faculty appointee of the new Graduate School of Geography. She was first appointed Lecturer (the title she held at Chicago), but in 1923, after the University of Kentucky had awarded her an honorary degree, she became Professor of Anthropogeography, the first woman to hold faculty rank at Clark. Charles Colby, in his memoir of Semple, wrote that "At Clark she came into her full powers as a teacher and as a director of research" (Colby 1933, 236; Koelsch 1980).



Figure 1. Ellen Churchill Semple, Clark University Office, 1920's. Photo courtesy of the Clark University Archives.

The School began operations in the fall of 1921. Semple normally taught in the fall semester only, which gave her the opportunity to travel, to teach elsewhere, and to write. Primarily she taught courses in anthropogeography and the geography of the Mediterranean, and occasionally offered courses in the geography of Europe or of portions of Asia. Her courses were attended largely by graduate students, though select advanced undergraduates might be admitted. Occasionally she offered seminars or research courses in anthropogeography or the history of geography. She was unquestionably the most internationally visible faculty member in the School (Clark University Catalogues; Koelsch 2013, 339-345).

Semple published seven professional articles on the Mediterranean world while at Clark before her disastrous heart attack in 1929. These were "The Influence of Geographic Conditions Upon Ancient Mediterranean Stock-Raising" (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*,

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1922); "Climatic Influences in Some Ancient Mediterranean Religions", presented at the Toronto meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1924 (*Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 1924); "Templed Promontories of the Ancient Mediterranean" (*Geographical Review*, 1927); "Ancient Mediterranean Agriculture" (in two parts, *Agricultural History*, 1928), originally given at a meeting of the Agricultural History Society in December 1927; "Irrigation and Reclamation in the ancient Mediterranean Region" (*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1929); and "Ancient Mediterranean Pleasure Gardens," (*Geographical Review*, 1929) (Colby 1933, 239-240).

If we examine these articles in chronological order, we see an interesting shift in Semple's point of view. In the earlier papers, though Semple still plays the "influence card" in the titles, the internal content gets less and less deterministic. As she discovers more, owing both to her travels and her additional research, other explanations begin to enter her argument. Here we might cite the experience with "The Inquiry" during World War I, and even such small changes as changing her anthropogeography course from "Principles of Anthropogeography" to "Anthropogeography of the Mediterranean," to say nothing of her wide reading and her interactions with other scholars.

"Semple and Harlan Barrows" "Geography as Human Ecology"

Harlan Barrows, Semple's former colleague in Chicago, had succeeded her as President of the Association of American Geographers. As such, he had given an important address, "Geography as Human Ecology," at the Association's annual meeting in December 1922, subsequently published in the Association's *Annals*. In it, Barrows argued that "Geographers will, I think, be wise to view this problem in general from the standpoint of man's adjustment to environment, rather than from that of environmental influence ... and especially to minimize the danger of assigning to the environmental factors a determinative influence which they do not exert." The concept of "human adjustment" runs throughout the address (Barrows 1923; Koelsch 1969).

Semple was no fan of her former Chicago colleague. She wrote her former colleague and protégé Derwent Whittlesey from West Palm Beach in 1932 that "Barrows is like the deadly upas tree of the oriental tropics: contact with him seems to kill every aspiration above a deadly mediocrity" (E. C. Semple to D. S. Whittlesey, 8 March 1932. Harvard University Archives). But Semple began gradually to shape her later papers to Barrows' concept of "human adjustment." This enabled her to step away from her earlier argument for "environmental influences." That concept is "missing in action" in her late published articles, and from the additional chapters of her Mediterranean book. Furthermore, as Keighren has shown, at Clark she began to reshape her teaching. Although her early graduate students there, such as Preston James, found her teaching quite rigid, her later students found her more open to a give-and-take mentality in her classes. By the mid-twenties a sea change appears evident, within Semple's publications and in her courses (Keighren 2010, 142-144, 151-154).

The first Clark publications, on Mediterranean stock raising and Mediterranean religions, do not clearly show this. But beginning with her paper (in publication expanded to two papers and becoming two chapters of her book) given before the Agricultural History Society in 1927, she uses the trope of “human adjustment.” In her opening statement of the first of the pair of papers, she begins to signal this shift of emphasis: “Ancient Mediterranean agriculture had to adjust itself to a complex group of geographic conditions.” And this is restated in the same paragraph: “Agriculture was stimulated by the necessity of adjusting itself to these varied geographic conditions, and hence attained a precocious development which in many respects anticipated the best modern achievements” (Semple 1928a, 61).

Note that here she does not use the word “Agriculturalists” who are actually making the adjustments; that comes later. Yet throughout both articles, humans modify their environments in a number of ways: by improving methods of cultivation, by terracing, and by manuring and seed selection. Their methods include “careful tillage, intelligent selection of crops..., importation of foreign seed and foreign plants, painstaking seed selection,” resulting in “a precocious form of intensive tillage” (Semple 1928a, 62). Further along, we read that “The ancient Greeks thus improved upon nature’s method, while following nature’s example, at a very early date. ...” (Semple 1928a, 91).

In the second article in *Agricultural History* (Chapter 15 of the book), we read that “The essence of ancient Mediterranean agriculture was the improvement of the soil. ...” (Semple 1928b, 129). And who improves the soil? Semple writes “The treatment and application of animal manures by the ancients reveals a painstaking adjustment to climactic conditions” (Semple 1928b, 136), “By age-long experiment the ancients learned the power of legumes to open up and mellow the soil...” and to make further adjustments to their environment. In this way “the ancients reveal a deep understanding of the manurial value of green legume crops...” (Semple 1928b, 143). And so on. These events are described not within a framework of environmental determinism, but of human adjustment to and use of the environment. In other words, the theme of Barrows’ “Geography as Human Ecology”.

The same theme appears in several of the chapters in *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region* that were not previously published as articles, and therefore dateable to Semple’s Clark years. In the opening paragraph of Chapter 3, “Earthquakes and Volcanoes,” physiographic features “stimulated observation, the correlation of facts; and finally they stirred the scientific imagination of the ancients to formulate theories of their origin. This intellectual response of a people to their environment was conspicuous and persistent...” (Semple 1931, 35). And again, in Chapter 5, “The Mediterranean Climate”: “Advancing civilization was chiefly progressive adjustment to this environment, made by the peoples living within reach of the Mediterranean coasts” (Semple 1931, 83).

In Chapter 6, “The Rivers of the Mediterranean Lands,” Semple writes that conspicuous erosion and deposition “impressed the ancient mind,” and it was the ancient mind that led to the formation of sound physiographic principles. And again, in Chapter 8, “The Nile and Red Sea Breach,” referencing Ferdinand de Lesseps, who enlarged the old Suez breach with his Suez Canal. This had made “a new adjustment to geographic conditions...” Similar statements can be found elsewhere in the book, and may serve to date the particular chapter (Semple 1931, 170).

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Other chapters that seem to revert to Semple's older, more deterministic views? Take Chapter 9, "The Eastern Barrier Boundary and its Breaches." Under the subheading "The Transit Land of Mesopotamia," Semple cites "the recurrent operation of geographic factors in history" as responsible for the practices of commercial and territorial expansion between the Persian Gulf and the eastern Mediterranean. In the next paragraph, she raises the question "What are the geographic factors in this recurrent historical development, the drama which returns with monotonous action and theme, though the actors change in race, nationality and civilization from one age to another?" Many similar statements could be found in other chapters (Semple 1931, 178,180).

How do we make sense of such contradictions in the same book? The answer is simple. The chapters that embrace Barrows' formula of "human adjustment to environment" were clearly written after Barrows' Presidential Address. Those that express variants of Semple's focus on geographic factors or "environmental influences" were written earlier. For the quotations above from Chapter 9, we have an exact knowledge of the date. Semple incorporated in this chapter material from her study of Mesopotamia written for "The Inquiry." A partial copy of that document is with other Semple papers for that activity, now in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Its date of completion is on it: February 1, 1918 (Semple 1918, *passim*; Semple 1931).

The Nature of the Mediterranean Book

This brings us to rethink the nature of *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*. It is a book that is not quite a book in the conventional sense. There is no single intellectual theme tying it all together, except that its content primarily covers the Mediterranean and its borderlands. Rather, it is a collection of essays, an anthology of Semple's writings on the subject, changing over time.

In his bibliographical review of American historical geography in *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect* (1954), Andrew Clark commented on Semple's last book. Clark argued that "the individual parts of the great series ultimately collected in *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*... are important documents in any inventory of American historical geography." This is a significant statement. It suggests that in attempting to appraise the book as a unified whole, we can miss the diversity and utility of the individual parts (Clark 1954, 82).

In this respect, Semple's Mediterranean book is similar to that of her sometime student and Chicago colleague Derwent Whittlesey. Semple had encouraged Whittlesey to pick up the work she had hoped to write until, late in her final illness, she knew she could not complete a book on political geography. She provided him with several pages of notes she had made for her own use (These are now in the Whittlesey papers at Harvard University Archives).

Whittlesey agreed to take on that task, though the book he ultimately wrote, *The Earth and the State* (1939) was very different from the one Semple, following Ratzel, would have written. The relevance of Whittlesey's book here, however, is that it too is a collection of essays that are somewhat independent of each other. Richard Hartshorne correctly described it in the *American Historical Review* as "a collection of related essays" (Hartshorne 1940, 92; Koelsch

2006). Semple's Mediterranean book was also a collection of essays, rather than a unified work. But the point here is that one can hardly pick out only the deterministic sentences in the earlier essays and ignore the shift of emphasis that characterizes the later ones.

But Semple's Mediterranean book is even more complex than we have seen thus far. Another scholar commented on it, in an essay almost contemporary with Andrew Clark's. In 1953, the Chicago sociologist Louis Wirth found three stages in Semple's intellectual growth, all represented in her work. He described them in this way:

[Semple's] "early emphasis on the determinative influence of habitat on ways of life and institutions subsequently shifted to a concern with man's adjustment to his natural habitat and still later to a primary interest in the interrelations between man in his group existence and his habitat. This brought human geography to a position where it was virtually identical with human ecology" (Wirth 1953, 66).

One finds this third stage, that of "the interrelations between man in his group existence and his habitat," most clearly expressed in Semple's late work at Clark. Such chapters and papers include "Templed Promontories of the Ancient Mediterranean" (1927); "Irrigation and Reclamation in the Ancient Mediterranean Region" (1929); "Ancient Mediterranean Pleasure Gardens" (also 1929); a late shorter piece, "Domestic and Municipal Waterworks in Ancient Mediterranean Lands" (1931); and the last two chapters in the Mediterranean book, "Trade and Industry" and "Colonization and Culture." These all conform to Wirth's view of human geography as "virtually identical" with human ecology.

The comments of Andrew Clark and Louis Wirth need to be taken seriously if one is to understand *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*. With their thoughtful appraisals as tools, we are better equipped to understand both the merits of Semple's last book and its flaws. Semple's approach to human geography over time reflects the progressive sequence of her modes of thought. There are significant changes in Semple's work as she moved from an earlier commitment to environment as a major determinant in human action, to the intermediate status of Harlan Barrows' concept of adjustment to environment, to man's role in creating the human habitat. The final paragraph of "Trade and Industry" tells us that "the great universities, poets, philosophers and artists of the ancient world were found in commercial cities,... for here the currents of thought flowed full and fast" (Semple 1931, 686). And in the final paragraph of the book, in the chapter on "Colonization and Culture," we learn that "the high-water mark of Mediterranean civilization is to be found in the polished manners which characterized these ancient people" (Semple 1931, 705). Such lines are not frequently found in geography books. More to the point, they are not subject to "environmental determinism."

The Completion of the Mediterranean Book

In his interview with Semple, published in the *Worcester Telegram* on 3 March 1929, the reporter told his readers that twelve chapters of the Mediterranean book were now complete, including the two most recent, "Ancient Mediterranean Pleasure Gardens" and "Ancient Mediterranean Irrigation." Semple told the reporter that she hoped to have the book completed "within two years" (*Worcester Telegram* 3 March 1929: "Dr. Semple to leave for vacation in Kentucky." Clark University Scrapbooks).

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But in November of that year, a time when she was teaching her Fall courses at Clark, Semple had a severe heart attack, coupled with the more lasting condition of "cardiac asthma." She was taken to a local hospital, where she remained under 24-hour care for about nine months. At times her doctors thought she would not survive, and only close relatives and President and Mrs. Atwood were permitted to visit, during her better days. But she rallied enough during the fall of 1930 to be moved to the home of Clark's Dean of the College, Homer Little, and his wife. There Semple remained, under 24-hour nursing care.

Her former Ph.D. student, Ruth Baugh, volunteered to come to Worcester that summer to help Semple finish her book. Working for at most two hours a day, Semple continued to write in bed. Clark provided secretarial help to type drafts as they were completed. By November, Semple was able to sit up for an hour or so each day. As she wrote Gladys Wrigley, "Desire to complete this book has kept me alive" (E. C. Semple to G. M. Wrigley, 29 August 1931, American Geographical Society Archives). Progress was gradual, but Semple was able to complete her final professional paper, "Domestic and Municipal Water Works in Ancient Mediterranean Lands," which was read for her at the Association of American Geographers meeting in Worcester in December, 1930, and subsequently published (Jackson 1931, Baugh 1932, Baugh 1961, Nash 1986, Trussel 1987).

Letters from Semple to Henry Holt in 1930-1931 suggest that Semple had taken full charge of her book manuscript. In October 1930 she reported "steady progress on my book. I confidently expect to finish every word of the text...." On 12 January 1931 she wrote that "My manuscript will be entirely ready by April first, all but the last chapter by March first.... All maps will be ready by March first, and half of them earlier." There was in fact some delay, but another letter on April 24 was accompanied by the first twenty-two chapters of the book and notes that all of the twenty-four maps had already been sent. She promised the incomplete Chapter 23 within three weeks. Miss Baugh, she noted, would be in Worcester around June 18th to aid Semple on the galley proofs. By 10 June her editor had gone over the manuscript "with increasing interest" (E.C. Semple to H. Holt & Co. 18 October 1930; 12 January 1931; 24 April 1931; H. Holt to E.C. Semple, 10 June 1931, all in H. Holt & Co. Archives, Princeton University Libraries).

Atwood had sought funding to bring Ruth Baugh for a second summer, ultimately securing support from the National Research Council. Miss Baugh was able to aid Semple in completing the book manuscript and to send off completed chapters to Holt. She accompanied Semple to cooler Petersham, Massachusetts where they completed the indexing, proof-reading, and other final matters. Miss Baugh remained in Worcester during the Fall semester to teach Semple's Mediterranean course, using rushed advance copies from Holt.

As Geoffrey Martin has told us, the original title of Semple's last book was "Geographic Influences in the History of the Mediterranean Region." All of President Atwood's appeals for financial support for Miss Baugh in the spring of 1931 used that title. Martin would not speculate as to who changed the title, though he thought the idea that Semple would have given up the word "influences" in the title "seems most unlikely" (Martin 2015, 416-417).

Nothing in the Holt files, whether for or to Semple, gives us the exact date of the title change. Semple uses "Mediterranean Book" in her correspondence with Holt. But it may be

possible to establish the change by indirection. First, we know from the *Telegram* report of March 1929 that Semple had then completed twelve chapters. Seven of these were written in her earlier “geographic influence” period; five were written later. She wrote twelve additional chapters (some of which began as published articles) after her illness, as well as one for a university magazine in Syria and “Promontory Towns of the Mediterranean” for Clark’s short-lived *Home Geographic Monthly*. These too reflect her post-determinist period.

Semple had not used “environmental influence” (or its variants) in any title in seven years, and in the content of seventeen of the twenty-four chapters. Would either Semple or Holt then wish to continue the original title? It seems more probable that either Holt or Semple herself suggested the new title. This would probably have been about the time of the submission of the manuscript. This would be the last chapter Semple sent to Holt in early May, and Holt’s letter to Semple of 10 June, when the editor had completed reading the manuscript. There is no letter, however, suggesting the change in either the Atwood or the Holt papers. (Semple to Holt, 24 April 1931; Holt to Semple 10 June 1931).



Figure 2. Ellen Churchill Semple. In recuperation, c. 1930 – 1931
Photo courtesy of the Clark University Archives

In late August, Semple had written Miss Wrigley from Petersham that she had made “a definite gain in health and strength” there. This was not to last. After spending a month in the hills of North Carolina, where the Atwoods visited her, she was taken to West Palm Beach for the winter. After Christmas, however, she had a relapse. On 7 May 1932, she wrote Isaiah Bowman that by June “I may be wandering through fields of asphodel to the Great Beyond.” She died in West Palm Beach early the following morning (E. C. Semple to G. M. Wrigley, 29 August 1931. American Geographical Society Archives ; E. C. Semple to I. Bowman, 7 May 1932, American Geographical Society Archives).

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On April 14th, 1932 the President of Henry Holt and Company had sent a letter to Semple, then in Florida, enclosing a royalty statement. In it he says that "We regard [Semple's] book as one of the most important books we have published in the last several years, and are proud to have it on our list." And her former Chicago colleague Charles Colby, in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, got it right: "No more courageous page has been written into the annals of American science or of American letters" (H. Holt to E. C. Semple, 14 April 1932. Princeton University Archives; Colby 1933, 237).

The Reception of the Mediterranean Book

Semple's friends produced a flurry of tributes in the guise of reviews in the geography periodicals during 1931-32, so that Semple could see them before she died. After her death, the Mediterranean book was of course mentioned in her obituaries. Charles Colby's memoir listed all of her publications, and praised her for completing *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*, but made no comment on its substance. Three years later, in his Presidential Address to the Association of American Geographers, Colby praised Semple's *American History and its Geographic Conditions* and her contribution to "the philosophy of anthropogeography." Curiously, he does not mention her Mediterranean book (Colby 1936, 21).

Carl Sauer liked Semple as a teacher and a human being, and in a late address praised her abilities as a lecturer. "When she was dealing with the ancient Mediterranean," Sauer recalled, "you could watch the ships turning the promontories on which the temples stood. You went with her!" But Sauer was less pleased with her scholarship. His short biographical piece on Semple in the 1934 *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* asserted that she "was never concerned with the origin, content and succession of culture areas," that she "deals with the ancient Mediterranean area without regard to historical sequences," and that, though she had "no restrictions as to kinds of cultural data," she was "interested in whatever data could be related to environmental conditioning" (Sauer, 1934, 1970).

In his "On the Background of Geography in the United States," Sauer does not specifically mention the Mediterranean book, but discusses Semple's work as setting forth "the continuity of environmental influence on history," and that "her view of historical geography was of the persistence of advantage or disadvantage of place, not one of change" (Sauer 1966, 259). And in his late assessment of the history of the discipline, in 1974, Sauer asserted that Semple "read history from the recent American past to classical antiquity as persistence of environmental advantage or denial," and that, like Ellsworth Huntington, "the human past was explained by favor or constraint of the physical environment" (Sauer, 1974, 190).

Clearly, Sauer had not read her Mediterranean book very carefully. These half-truths, however elegantly written, do not allow for the perspective Semple had developed in her later years, based on her additional reading and field experience in the Mediterranean, and on Barrows' Presidential Address. Her late papers and book chapters simply do not support Sauer's characterization.

During the 1930s, younger geographers were not interested in the ancient Mediterranean. In any case, the few American geographers working in historical geography during that time,

following British practice, split the field into two halves: historical geography proper, which during the 1930s and 1940s generally meant a spatial slice of the geography of a past time, and something called “geographical history,” which allowed for analysis of historical processes, but was best left to historians (Myres et al, 1932). Semple’s books and others like them were essentially, under this rubric, tossed out of the discipline.

Richard Hartshorne, in *The Nature of Geography* (1939), channeling Alfred Hettner’s dictum that “the cultivation of historical geography should lie mostly in the hands of historians,” nevertheless modified that statement to permit historical geography to become a part of the geographic discipline, if confined to cross-sections of past periods. But Hartshorne denied the geographer the opportunity of studying “the detailed processes of development” except for individual features. The only one of Semple’s books he cites in that treatise is her *American History and Its Geographic Conditions*.

Hartshorne modified his position, however, in a later volume, *Perspective on the Nature of Geography* (1959), especially in a long footnote on pp. 56-57. George Tatham, writing on “Environmentalism and Possibilism” in Griffith Taylor’s *Geography in the Twentieth Century*, lists Semple as “a third and last exponent of determinism,” citing her *Influences of Geographic Environment* (as Hartshorne does in *Perspectives*). But neither man mentions Semple’s *Geography of the Mediterranean Region* (Hartshorne 1939; Tatham 1951, 143-147; Hartshorne 1959, 56-57).

A period of serious reexamination of the Semple legacy began with a doctoral dissertation completed in 1973 at St. Louis University. The study, titled “Ellen Semple: Contribution to the History of American Geography,” was the work of Judith Bronson, and, unfortunately, never published. In it, Bronson devoted little space to the Mediterranean book, but what she wrote about it was incisive.

To Semple, Bronson argues, “mountains and plains were not objects of study in themselves, but barriers or passages for human intercourse. Seaward-facing promontories related to trade routes, serving as obstacles to navigation or as sacred shrines and temples built to appease angry gods of water and wind.” Bronson continued: “Justinian’s law governing water rights expressed man’s response to scant rainfall in an agrarian environment. Mediterranean pleasure gardens, whose forms, colors, sounds and smells she portrayed with artistic sensitivity, represented man’s expression of the aesthetic impulse, as well as the result of intensive cultivation in a land of marginal agricultural values. . . . Her last work was her greatest contribution to American geographic literature” (Bronson 1973, 129).

In Bronson’s encomium, then, we find a turning-point in the discussion. She recognized that Semple’s major contribution to American geography in her later years was not “environmental determinism,” but Mediterranean peoples’ roles in “changing the face of the earth,” to steal the title of a major symposium held at Princeton University in 1955.

A second important study, this one focused solely on the Mediterranean volume, was a master’s thesis written by Carolyn Baker Lewis, earned at the University of South Carolina under Allen Bushong’s direction. “The Biography of a Neglected Classic: Ellen Churchill Semple’s *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region*,” completed in 1979, is a comprehensive treatment, 179 pages long. Lewis situated the work in the context of earlier classical geography; its reception in geography, classics and history journals; and ruminations on its fate as a

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forgotten book. Like Bronson's dissertation, no part of it has ever been published. More's the pity; it should have been. It is a thoughtful, well-sourced work. If published, it would have made Semple's last book more widely known to geographers, ancient historians and classicists (Lewis 1979).

Vassar College held a conference on Semple, a Vassar alumna, in April 1992. The last in a series, "The Evelyn A. Clark Symposium on Excellence in Teaching" (in honor of a retired Vassar professor), this conference was sponsored by Vassar's geography department. Fred Lukermann was the keynote speaker. Among the papers, Pradyumna Karan and Wilford Bladen offered a paper on "Semple in Kentucky and at Chicago" and Mildred Berman one on "The Geographical Influence of Ellen Churchill Semple at Clark University."

All of the papers were the work of highly competent scholars. There was talk of publishing the conference papers in the *Occasional Papers of the Association of American Geographers* series, but unfortunately nothing came of it – another missed opportunity. Berman presented a slightly different version of her paper as "Ellen Churchill Semple at Chicago and Clark" for a session on "Geography in Illinois" at an AAG meeting in Chicago in 1995, but neither version reached publication.

The only conference paper to be published was Kathleen Braden's "Regions, Semple and Structuration," published later in 1992 in the *Geographical Review*. Its argument rested heavily on Semple's last book. In two quotations, one from Semple's 1910 study of the "Anglo-Saxons of the Kentucky Mountains" and the other from Chap. VI of the Mediterranean book, Braden shows us the major change of emphasis. "In the first quotation, nature is the agent, humans are the victims...In the second quotation, humans are the agents, and nature the transformed victim...In the latter case, humans make choices..." Semple's third section, "Vegetation and Agriculture," is mainly a narrative of case study after case study of human modification of the Mediterranean environment. Braden summarizes these case studies conclusively: "For each demonstration of a natural constraint on human affairs, she offers an example of how humans overcame it. For every barrier, humans found a breach" (Braden 1992, 238, 240).

Two biographies of Semple have been "works in progress" for decades; neither has appeared. In 2011, Ellen Adams completed a doctoral dissertation on Semple, "Ellen Churchill Semple and American Geography in an Era of Imperialism," at the College of William and Mary. Adams' work has little on the Mediterranean book, but follows Braden in pointing out that Semple, in much of it, writes of human agency "as the decisive factor in the formation of ancient Mediterranean cultures," and suggests that Semple's analysis is similar to the geography of Paul de la Blache (Adams 2011, 290-291).

The latest published material on *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region* appears to be in two books in the Tauris Historical Geography Series. Innes Keighren's *Bringing Geography to Book* (Keighren 2010, 142-145, 155), though centered on *Influences*, has brief material on Ruth Baugh and also on Semple's later years. My *Geography and the Classical World* (2013), devotes eleven pages to Semple's work at Chicago and Clark. Both briefly treat the Mediterranean book. In my 2014 study of Semple's American Historical Association conference paper at the American Historical Association's 1907 meeting, I briefly point out Semple's later acceptance of Barrows' "human adjustment to environment" concept (Koelsch 2013, 334-345; Koelsch 2014, 56).

Why Should Geographers Read This Book?

The Geography of the Mediterranean Region remains a major, if ignored, contribution to the American geographical literature. It is one of the most important books by an American geographer to have been written in the first third of the twentieth century. As a major work of geographic scholarship, flawed though it may be, the book has few equals in the disciplinary corpus. In the period before World War II, only one other geography title comes close, Derwent Whittlesey's *The Earth and the State*.

Why should today's geographers read Semple's Mediterranean book? First, because it is beautifully, almost flawlessly written. Semple knew how to attract attention, enticing the reader with a seductive opening line or first paragraph. Take the opening sentence of Chapter 1: "All the world is heir of the Mediterranean." Or the opening words of "Templed Promontories": "The traveler who crosses the Aegean Sea from Smyrna to Athens is greeted at the threshold of Greece with a vision of ancient Hellenic beauty."

Such a suggestion - or such an example - may come as a shock to professional geographers, who tend to leave such matters up to the *National Geographic* or even Rick Steves' televised travelogues. But good writing respects the reader. There is no requirement to bludgeon him or her into submission, much less to leave the reader bored to death. Semple never made such a mistake. Her paragraphs bring the reader quickly into a relationship with the subject at hand and enable him or her to want to go further. It's important.

Second, Semple's book should be read as an example of the level of scholarly research we all need to muster. The number, variety and selectivity of her primary sources is truly astonishing. Her secondary sources were written by leading scholars of her time and earlier. Semple is clear about where her sources are coming from and makes good use of them, fashioning them into a well-grounded argument. Her book is both the mark of a seasoned scholar and a model for students (and faculty members) to emulate.

Third, I fully realize that today's academic atmosphere imposes special burdens on younger scholars that scholars in Semple's day (and mine) did not experience. Quick publication appears increasingly to be a necessity in the fevered competition for finding the path to permanent academic appointments, themselves shrinking in number.

Still, there is much to be said for geographers (once securely tenured?) embracing substantial research projects requiring a lengthy period of commitment to larger, long-term objectives (Berg and Seeber 2016). Semple did this, as did H. C. Darby, Clarence Glacken, Donald Meinig, Geoffrey Martin and others. Short-term, minor league projects that find temporary funding tend to lead only to temporary usefulness. The place of geography as an academic discipline is always at risk. If for no other reason, recognition for its security in the academy suggests that we would do well to emulate Semple in her careful research on a major topic of interest, and her ability to present it in accessible and pleasing fashion.

If one example could best pull together Semple's genius for searching out important, if neglected, topics and presenting them with polished erudition, it would be "The Templed Promontories of the Ancient Mediterranean." This article was published with copious illustrations (unfortunately not retained in the book version) as the lead article in the July 1927 issue of the *Geographical Review* (Semple, 1929).

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The enterprise began with a question: Why was a temple placed on the headland of the Attic peninsula? Semple began to wonder whether there were other, similar temples on such sites. Searching the memory of her Latin classes, she recalled a reference to temples on southern Italian promontories, mentioned in the *Aeneid*. Semple then began "throwing out a dragnet" over the classical literature. Over a fourteen-year period, she found 175 such promontory shrines, as well as more than a dozen sacred headlands for which no structures have survived.

As any good geographer would do, Semple then distributed these sanctuaries, locating them on a large map. (Her original manuscript map, probably created by Clark's cartographer, Guy Burnham, survives in the Clark University Map Library.) From there, she began to develop hypotheses, incorporating both the literary evidence and the physical phenomena of winds and currents around certain promontories, such as the dreaded Cape Malea in the southern Peloponnese. To these, she was able to affix the various "Promontory Gods" and how they were related to specific promontories. Then she worked out the succession of human occupation, from remote Antiquity to Greek, and to Roman. These were succeeded by the chapels and churches of Christian saints, often on the exact sites of earlier pagan sanctuaries.

The text of the article is accompanied by two maps by the American Geographical Society's cartographers, who cut down the numbers of sites from Semple's original (lent them for the evidence). Some thirty charming illustrations accompany the text, most the work of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century artists associated with expeditions in the Mediterranean. Indeed, Semple herself wrote Gladys Wrigley that "the subject has been full of charm for me" (E.C. Semple to G.M. Wrigley, 15 January 1927). Anyone reading the illustrated version would agree.

Of all of Semple's published papers, I would recommend this one to students, both as an exemplary way of "doing geography" and for a mental cleansing of the common professional stereotyping of its author. Although necessarily she treats of environmental matters, the changing human uses of these promontories over time is the dominant motif of the article.

Semple's Mediterranean treatise, as Samuel Van Valkenburg described it to me, was "her best book, and unfortunately neglected" (Van Valkenburg 1958). That it was indeed her best book, the product of many years of scholarly and ground-level research, is to her credit. That it is still "unfortunately neglected" is to the shame of the geography profession.

Since 1931 scholars have greatly advanced our knowledge of Mediterranean history and geography and in the expansion of the evidence on which to base it. Some, with reason, have suggested that Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II* (1949) subsequently expanded and published in English offers a more refined model. Indeed, the work of both the early (including the work of Roger Dion) and the later work of the "Annales School" with its respect for historical geography, has brought us new sources and new methods of assessing them. More recently, there is the important work of the prolific David Abulafia, and one could list many others.

Mediterranean research since 1931, while it certainly has enhanced our knowledge, in no way denigrates Semple's late work. Perhaps someday, some geographer will take up Semple's challenge and write the better book or provide the better replacement model she welcomed. In the interim, we would do well to avoid the behavior of those commentators whose appraisals of Semple's late work are too often "without fear and without research."

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