



Back to the Garden: Nature and the Mediterranean World from Prehistory to the Present

James H. S. McGregor

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The garden was the cultural foundation of the early Mediterranean peoples; they acknowledged their reliance on and kinship with the land, and they understood nature through the lens of their diversely cultivated landscape. Their image of the garden underwrote the biblical book of Genesis and the region's three religions. For millennia, there was no sharp divide between humankind and the land that was home. To be sure, the elements could be harsh, their origins mysterious, but there was a widespread consensus that presumed a largely harmonious working relationship with Nature. Traditional agriculture in the ancient Mediterranean mimicked the key traits of naturally occurring ecosystems. It was diverse, complex, self-regulating, and resilient.

This relationship effectively came to an end in the late eighteenth century, when “nature” was steadily equated with the untamed landscape devoid of human intervention. In the early part of the century, the human world, the agricultural realm, and the province of uncultivated nature were one continuous field with no internal boundaries. By century's end, however, key writers had created a sharp divide within this continuum and separated the agricultural world from the world of nature. This abrupt and dramatic change of sensibility upended ecological understanding and had enormous consequences—consequences with which we are still struggling.

In *Back to the Garden*, James H. S. McGregor argues that the environmental crisis the world faces today is a result of Western society's abandonment of the “First Nature” principle—of the harmonious interrelationship of human communities and the natural world. This essential work offers a new understanding of environmental accountability while proposing that recovering the original vision of ourselves, not as antagonists of nature but as cultivators of a biological world to which we innately belong, is possible through proven techniques of the past. Much has been lost, the landscape has been degraded, and traditional knowledge has died away. But there is still much that can be recovered, studied, and reimagined.

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