

Alexander Rubel, *Migration. Eine Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit*, Kohlhammer, 2024, 332 pages, 30 illustrations.

If a PhD candidate asked the present reviewer to coordinate her dissertation titled, like the book discussed herein, “Migration. A cultural history of humankind”, he would sermon her that this is an impossibly vast topic for a historian, adding stereotypically that a research topic should be limited to 2-3 things that happened over a few years in a couple of places. The same reviewer is known to later have grabbed this very book from the shelf and had a blast reading it. Is it possible that many of us have forgotten that we’ve not become historians in order to corner ourselves into irrelevant minutiae? Indeed, we have forsaken, for at least half a century now, the dream of major historians of yore, which was to write ambitious syntheses. Alexander Rubel, an accomplished archaeologist and Classicist, delivers a magnificent book which is here to remind us that such syntheses of global history may well be our ultimate goal.

This, however, is not one of those erudite books that zero in on a traditional subject and explain it to death. The real challenge today with the topic “migration” is not how to say everything about it, but how to say little and still make good sense – how to give students and experts alike food for thought, marshalling solid, yet picturesque evidence to cover all bases, from the Paleolithic until today. I have not found so much knowledge and insight in a slim – by encyclopedic standards – book since Arnold Toynbee’s *Cities on the move*.

Rubel does not set out, of course, to wiki-lecture us alphabetically about all migrations in human history. He attempts to establish that migration, rather than being an exception, is an anthropological constant in the history of humankind, and that, rather than being something utterly negative, so often vilified nowadays, it is also a crucial factor in bringing about positive cultural change. Migration, it is argued, transforms the world into a highly clustered, small-world network. Perhaps what Rubel is best at is showing that cultural hybridization and transcultural identities are in no way a modern invention. They were the side effects of mobility and migration,



in other words of crossing *boundaries* (and not necessarily *borders*), since day one. Rubel also emphasizes the agency of migrants, since many of them are never being driven out (including out of the primordial African Paradise), but leave of their own accord. He argues that migration has been insufficiently studied, and correspondingly bad-mouthed, due to the prevailing ideology of sedentarism. This ideology responds to the anxieties brought about by social instability and encounters with the Other and expresses the values of the bourgeoisie, being rooted in the concept of property and extolling the ideal situations (in fact, philistine chimeras) of autochthony and sedentarism.

Most of us associate migration with the 20th century, but *sapiens* have migrated for the past 70.000 years. Rubel is able to prove, however, that this is indeed the century of forced migration – he discusses the 100 million Chinese fleeing the Japanese invasion in 1937 and the 15-20 million displaced between Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan during the Partition of British India in 1947. Readers will learn that, in 1907, in the German Reich one in two people did not reside in their place of birth, and that 500.000 Poles were living in the Ruhr Area before WW1, as well as the reason why French-language historians like Braudel, Higonnet, and Pirenne ended up writing fundamental books while being prisoners of war in Germany. Now, to take a step back, illustrative for Rubel's method is how he retells the story of the Town Musicians of Bremen, then discusses it academically from the point of view of migrants' motivations, challenges, and end result. Throughout the book, this is how Rubel, acting as an expert-*cum*-science-communicator, humanizes the stories and builds compelling and memorable cases.

These fascinating case studies illuminate the Neolithic (excavations in Blätterhöhle, Sauerland, speak volumes about the parallel societies at the time of the Michelsberg culture), the Bronze age (Lechtal, the "Amesbury Archer", that first globalized world which was the Bronze Age Aegean, the Sea Peoples), the Greek world (the travels of Odysseus, the Phoenician dimension of the Greek civilization, the colonization of Ai-Khanoum in Afghanistan, Zenon's archive of papyri), the Romans (from that Trojan migrant named Aeneas to the Phoenician glassmakers in Lugdunum or the Alexandrine merchants in Tomis), and the *Völkerwanderungszeit* (all migrant groups, explains Rubel, had always wanted a piece of the cake, but the Huns were the first who actually wanted to whack the pastry chef).

Such a dry list conceals that Rubel's approach always avoids the well-trodden path. He collects data concerning marriage-driven migration, and the stories of Italian architects disseminating their ideas while working in Russia, Poland, or Hungary, and, conversely, data on French ones in England. For more modern times, Rubel is able to offer spectacular digressions about how various cultures and populations

contributed to the fabric of jazz, or, for that matter, to the ever-changing make-up of European football national teams from the all-white teams of 1954 until today, or to the Westfriedhof, a cemetery in Köln. He does not pontificate about disembodied migrations, but attempts to also single out individuals and tell their stories, from Katarina Vilioni (d. 1342), one of the first Europeans living in China, to a migrant from the Palatinate to the US, which contributed to the development of the American beer industry (this migrant is later revealed to be the grandfather of Donald Trump – and there is yet another investigation into Boris Johnson’s genealogy). All this is spiced up with the academic wanderings of the likes of Anselm of Canterbury, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Thomas of Aquino, then later with the scientific expeditions of Chamisso and Alexander von Humboldt, and even Goethe, who, having spent almost a year and a half in Rome, could qualify as a migrant. (In a second edition of the book, a word would also be in order about the plight of contemporary travelling post-docs.) Perhaps the key case study concerning religiously-motivated migration focuses on the Huguenots, and the subsequent integration of these French Calvinists in Germany, and their role in the cultural ascent of Brandenburg-Prussia from the 17th c. onwards. The further relocation of a few of them to South Africa accounts for the beginnings of – this time – the wine industry there. And, to return once again to the Brothers Grimm, Rubel carefully unpacks how their quest for a national German identity under Napoleonic occupation made them seek out “national” tales, turning a blind eye to the fact that certain elements in these tales harked back to the Huguenot immigration. Everywhere you look there will be bold ideas, such as Rubel’s argument that patterns of migration only changed fundamentally with the invention of passports.

The unsuspecting European readers of this book will never approach the idea of migration the same way again knowing that the majority of their DNA was already decided by the time of the Bronze Age: some 2% Neanderthalian, 20 % Paleolithic hunter-gatherers, 30% Anatolian bearers of the Neolithic agricultural kit, and 20% Yamnaya Proto-Indo-Europeans. At the end of the book, they will get the overwhelming feeling that history, far from being the traditional chain of biographies of great leaders, is in fact a sum of migrations and how they were metabolized by the world which saw them unfold.

To conclude, this book illustrates well a quote attributed to an American president - "the historian must have no country". Rubel is a universal historian with a Renaissance-like ambition and ability to speak for the citizens of the world, while always backed by the most recent scientific research. He departs from ideas such as Weber’s static Middle Ages, used as a foil to the grand narratives of modern nations, rejects Jared Diamond’s geographical determinism, and harnesses a vast array of theoretical contributions from J. Osterhammel, P. Manning, J. and L. Lucassen and

others. It is worth restating that this volume is unusual in speaking about migration as a universal, timeless, phenomenon – rather than something we only see from the 17th c. onwards.

Rubel has previously tackled the topic of ancient migrations in *Migration in der Antike, von der Odyssee bis Mohammed*, wbg Academic, 2024, but his oeuvre for the past 25 years seemed to herald this *magnus opum*. In 2000 he wrote in *Études germaniques* about Ernst Jünger's novel *Eumeswil*, named for an imaginary dystopic city, crowded with immigrants, and in 2019 he persuasively advocated in an article in the *Classical World* ("Quo Vadis Altertumswissenschaft?") for multilingualism in Classical studies. Multiple perspectives, blended with wit and immense learning, will draw in any reader of this exceptional volume.

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