

Introduction
A Mediterranean of Traveling Faces and Ideas

ÖZLEM ÇAYKENT and LUCA ZAVAGNO

This selection of essays is the third edition of the Mediterranean Worlds (MedWorlds) Conference, which was held at the University of Salerno in 2011. Nevertheless, it is not simply the proceedings of a conference. In our opinion these carefully selected essays are a step along a long term and interdisciplinary effort to examine the diverse social, political, economic and religious aspects engrossing the matrix of communications across the Mediterranean basin from the early Medieval to the Modern era. The aim of this small conference was to bring together scholars from diverse backgrounds on a common theme to create a real “supradisciplinary” discussion zone. In this light these scholarly meetings had its origin largely in recent increase in a Mediterranean history whether it is commerce, politics or social aspects. In specific this interest is aims to look beyond the national and individual cultural territorial boundaries trying to establish the networks of communications in their various aspects.

The fruits of these meetings came together in 2009 with the publication of the proceedings of the first MedWorlds conference centered upon the interpretative issues of Mediterranean cultural encounters and continued few years later with the publication of the edited volume exploring the influence on and the role of the Mediterranean islands early modern and modern era (Khoo, Marotta & Zavagno, 2009; Çaykent & Zavagno, 2014).

Each of the abovementioned meetings took place at different locations that realised as the result of a collaborative effort among a growing number of different European and American institutions, which joined the ranks of the MedWorlds family. The result is remarkable. This volume brings together a constellation of a multi-focused collection of articles that explore the politics and economics of trade across the Mediterranean in the passage from the late Medieval period to the modern era; narratives centered upon the tangible and intangible aspects of commercial relationship across political, religious and cultural frontiers of the Mediterranean; a narrative piercing through the Commercial revolution of the

eleventh century when – as Cipolla states – mercatores dictated the tempo of a social and cultural revolution (Cipolla 1967: 52-7).

Since the volume includes papers on different aspects of the commercial dynamics – from historical to archaeological, from political to sociological – it aims at illustrating the important interactive role trade played within different Mediterranean societies stressing the continuity emanated from people (traders and other actors) and used spaces (trade routes) from the seventh to the seventeenth century.

Certainly, the array of essays in this volume is much indebted to two compelling volumes at the very heart of the historiographical debate on the Mediterranean: *The origins of European Commerce* by Michael McCormick and *The Corrupting Sea* by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (McCormick, 2001; Horden & Purcell, 2000). Indeed, these seminal works have contributed to reassess the historiographical debate on the nature of Mediterranean communications, cultural interaction and political and economical relationship across different historical periods. In particular, as the latter stressed the importance of connectivity in the Mediterranean (with an ecological penchant), the former focused on the role of commerce and communications at the origins of the Mediterranean world as a vehicle for the creation of a European economy.

Although McCormick deals with the period 300-900 A.D., the methodological importance of his analytical approach moves beyond the late antique and early medieval period. A great deal of systematic and exhaustive collection of literary and documentary sources together with indirect evidence of communication and, material evidences (from coins to seals, from shipwrecks to ceramics) give us further clues in this methodology.

McCormick highlights the fact that rather than expecting that the sources provide us with what we want, we should take what they can give to us, for they give us communications (McCormick, 2001, p. 16.) In order to trace these communications McCormick insisted upon two sets of movements: the movement of individuals and of objects.

If independent sets of evidence continuously uncover the same patterns, chances are strong that those patterns stem from reality, and are not artifacts of the circumstances, which produced and preserved that set of evidence (McCormick, 2001, p. 18).

Upon presenting the reader with a wide array of objects that travelled (from relics to coins) and people on the move (from ambassadors to pilgrims), McCormick provided a richer matrix for patterns of Mediterranean communications not always commercial in nature.

With this caveats in mind this volume stresses the continuities in the dynamic connectivity of the Mediterranean. In fact there is an endless loop of continuously building, shifting and reestablishing of networks and goods traveling across the Mediterranean which reminds us of Penelope and her loom where endless threads and knots were made during the day and unraveled during the night. In a similar vein (loosely in tune with a Braudelian *longue durée*), the volume offers an interdisciplinary and encompassing digest over the manifold actors of this incessant

weaving and undoing of communications across different periods of Mediterranean history.

However, it is useful to emphasize that apart from the two above mentioned seminal works, this volume tries to follow the course of scholarly history set by those economic historians like Henry Pirenne, Carlo Cipolla, Roberto Sabatino Lopez, Emanuel Ashtor and more recently Richard Hodges, Angeliki Laiou, Cecile Morrisson, Karl Persson, David Jacoby and Chris Wickham (to quote just a few); rather than proposing a generalizing, macro-historical narrative of the trading institutions or merchant activities inhabiting the coasts of the *Mare di Mezzo*. The volume indeed explores a number of key studies (micro-histories) spanning across almost ten centuries of Mediterranean history.

The first essay by Thomas McMaster analyses the often invisible and faceless (in the written sources) groups of forced laborers, namely slaves. Dispelling the idea that the cultural unity of the Mediterranean was broken by the ruinous Muslim incursions, this paper stresses a re-orientation of shipping routes and trade patterns, which predated the appearance of Islam in the Mediterranean coasts. In tune with this idea of functional rearrangement of commercial relationships between western and eastern half of the Mediterranean, it also establishes the relationship of the Mediterranean to continental Europe.

The second contribution by Slobodan Paich partially moves away from the Mediterranean trade depicted by McMaster to usher the reader into the world of the abovementioned “faces who travelled” the exchange routes crisscrossing the Great Sea. Paich’s essay represents an audacious attempt to picture a diachronic and comparative backcloth of the maritime dynamics that aided or hindered flows of trade, populations and ideas. By looking briefly at itineraries of several carriers of intangible cargos of knowledge, inspiration and expertise the author reflects upon the history of the transmission of ideas and skills throughout the Mediterranean. In particular Paich’s attention focuses on late Byzantium and the life, travel and influence of Georgius Gemistus Pletho (1355-1454). His philosophy and life work summarizes intellectual currents of the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor in the Late Middle Ages and even inspired Cosimo de’ Medici to found a new Platonic Academy.

In this light, Paich’s contribution is an ideal link to the second part of the book, which moves to communication and cultural traffic emanating from personal exchanges. Mariarosaria Salerno and Stephan Sander-Faes’s essays, offer excellent examples of inter-Mediterranean communications and relations generated through the role of elites. On the one hand we are presented with a complex coexistence of political and cultural implications of the long standing interest in and influence of the Maghrebi during the thirteenth and fourteenth century on the rulers of the Neapolitan Kingdom. On the other hand the second essay moving to the northern part of the peninsula dwells on the importance of “procuratorial” appointments for the reconstruction of ‘communication’ in Venice during the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Period. The suitable characteristics and advantages of the

procurae, indeed, make them an ideal tool to investigate the extent of Venetian commercial and political network of communications.

The next article by Alessandro Buono reminds us that the above mentioned network was also the results of the incessant travels of crucial group of border-crossers, the pedotti: a real maritime minority of professional ferries between Istria and the Serenissima who in the sixteenth century not only transported ships and goods but also contributed to forge a cultural link between the two sides of the Adriatic.

Finally, and in tune with the coda of the volume, Federico Rigamonti encourages the reader to look beyond the Mediterranean in a diachronic and comparative perspective. He is reflecting on the different modes, natures and trajectories of traveling and communications while at the same time analyzing the gravitational attraction exerted by the Mediterranean over Dutch traders -- with particular emphasis on their presence in Sicilian ports.

In conclusion, by looking at the plurality of lives and influences of different Mediterranean commodities and intellectuals, the abovementioned collection of articles reflect on and revisit the history of the transmission of ideas and skills from the Byzantine to the Ottoman era. Basically, journeys, and especially sea journeys with their onboard cargos both goods and people in an inescapable small space for several weeks/months, were the only tangible element in the convergence and divergence of worldviews. In these ship-spaces the arteries of trade routes became elusive carriers of songs, philosophies and technical know-how. In fact, whether the Mediterranean facilitates cultural and ethnic interplay, or whether we view it as a barrier that separates civilizations and traditions, a close study of Mediterranean on the sea exchanges can be very revealing. The history of transportation and commercial activities tell stories of men and cultures; the nature of individuals and societies; problems inherent in shipping and routes, as well as faiths of currencies and commodities. Looking at commercial activity and travelling is the method of mapping, reading and comprehending the Mediterranean world, and the dialogue of societies beyond its immediate shores. It reveals a dialogue shaped into an “intangible cargo” and transported across shipping routes often escaping the deeper glimpse of historians.

References

- Ashtor, E. (1976). *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages*. Los Angeles: UC press.
- Çaykent Ö. & Zavagno L. (Eds.) (2014). *The Islands of the Eastern Mediterranean: a History of Cross-cultural Encounters*. London-New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Cipolla, C.M. (1967). *Money, prices and Civilizations in the Mediterranean World*. Princeton: Gordian.
- Hodges, R. & Whitehouse D. (Eds.) (1983). *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe. Archeology and the Pirenne Thesis*. Ithaca-NY: Cornell University Press
- Horden, P. & Purcell, N. (2000). *The Corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Introduction. A Mediterranean of Traveling Faces and Ideas

- Jacoby, D. (2005). *Commercial Exchange across the Mediterranean: Byzantium, the Crusader Levant, Egypt and Italy*. Aldershot: Variorum.
- Khoo, T., Marotta, V. & Zavagno, L. (Eds.) (2010). Mediterranean Worlds: Cultures Issue of Interpretation. Proceedings of the I MedWorlds Conference, Famagusta 3-6 June 2009. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31 (3).
- Laiou, A. & Morrisson, C. (2007). *The Byzantine Economy*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Lopez, R.S. (1961). *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*. NY: Columbia Univ. Press.
- McCormick, M. (2001). *Origins of European Economy. Communications and Commerce AD. 300-900*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Persson, K.G. (2010). *An Economic History of Europe: Knowledge, Institutions and Growth 600 to the Present*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Pirenne, H. (2001). *Mohammed and Charlemagne*. Dover: Dover Ed.
- Wickham, C. (2005). *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean. 400-800*. Oxford: OUP.