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The Mediterranean
HENK DRIESEN

A Seaward View on a Transitional Region

The Mediterranean area has always had a somewhat uncertain, marginal, and ambivalent position in the field of established area specializations, which recently were defined by rather rigid and arbitrary geo-political boundaries. 'The Middle East', a product of the strategic thinking of 19th-century 'Europe' (itselves in a Eurocentric category), is a case in point. Scholars, in particular anthropologists, working in the Middle East and North Africa have often studied this region as detached from the wider Mediterranean world. One good reason to correct this myopic perspective is to be found in the basic fact that the Mediterranean region has been the breeding ground of globalization and cosmopolitanism in which the sea played a major role.

Anthropologists and to a lesser extent geographers and historians have largely avoided the Mediterranean Sea or, if they suffered from Carthaginian, Roman or other Mediterranean unity, in which the sea is seen as the connection between peoples, cultures, and societies, and Mediterranean diversity, in which the sea is conceived as a barrier, are based on research conducted in the interior rather than in the coastlands. This is all the more striking because Mediterranean seaports, with their ethnic trading minorities, have for more than two thousand years been hubs in networks with connections to other regions. Not only the anthropological and geographical perspective has been marked by territorialism. The view of the Mediterranean as an island, isolated and hardly surprising, is, it is nevertheless biased.

The study of the circum-Mediterranean area, with an emphasis on the sea, should not neglect the sea, because it has made possible a relatively easy transport of people, goods, and ideas. The primacy of the sea of a Mediterranean focus is thus a matter of logical priority determined by the sea's central position in a network of connections, even in the present age of fast communication by air, satellite, and cable. All of seas and oceans, the Mediterranean has the longest documented history of human interaction. Recent genetic, archaeological, linguistic, and anthropological research has demonstrated that pre-neolithic exchange occurred between northern and southern shores. The recent finding of a series of early palaolithic flint tools on Sardinia indicates that more than 300,000 years ago Homo Erectus was able to travel short distances over sea.

The sea as social space

One of the themes, receiving more attention concerns the relationships of Mediterranean peoples, past and present, with the sea. This theme involves perceptions, classifications, and exploitations of the sea. During its long documented history the Inner Sea was often attributed an ambiguous and sometimes ambivalent role in Mediterranean cosmologies. Until the 18th century, when a significant change of attitude towards the sea took place, particularly on the northern shores, it mostly inspired fear and abhorrence. Several Ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, who lived on the coasts and in the sea, saw it as a threat to the integrity of social order. However, at the same time the Inner Sea was more no man's land, an integral part of the imperial territory and identity. In the Old Testament the sea is depicted as a plumbless and dark hostling the voyage of the Flood, an empire of chaos, monsters, and demons. In the eyes of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine, the sea was both a source of life and a realm of death. In spite of its storms and torments, it made possible Paul's missionary travels and thus the spread of the Christian faith. The problematic relationship of Islam with the sea, which is reflected in written as well as oral traditions, is linked with the limited dependence and accurate research. The role of the sea in the rituals of coastal towns and villages around the Mediterranean is yet another fascinating topic that should be further explored, apart from the instrumental relationships. Seacoast dwellers maintain with the sea.

Modern transients: tourists and migrants

A seaward perspective inevitably entails sustained interest in tourists and migrants as modern transients. Each year between June and September approximately 110 million tourists spend their holiday along the Mediterranean Sea. This is a third of the global tourist flow. In the light of this massive arrival of foreign, and more recently, domestic tourists, the Inner Sea has taken on an entirely new meaning as an economic and social resource. Moreover, the mass tourism transformed and homogenized formerly diverse coastal landscapes with regard to buildings, economic and leisure activities, manners, and the perception and organization of time. It has also drastically affected centre-periphery relations, the fragile coastal environment, and the quality of life in most Mediterranean countries. Although much research has already been done, the ongoing diversification of touristic demand and supply – for instance the emergence of Islamic beach tourism in Mediterranean Turkey or of retirement migration to Italy and Spain – is an important frame for further inquiry.

The massive counter-movement of Mediterranean migrants to the North is an equal- ly perplexing phenomenon that needs during attention. During the past ten years the largely clandestine trans-Mediterranean migration has become a major socio-political issue within the European Union and will undoubtedly remain so for the coming decades. A seaward perspective pays special attention to the role and interactions across the Mediterranean with regard to transnational community formation, the exchange of consumer goods and information, and the distribution of symbolic, social, and religious capital. For instance, there is a growing conviction in the towns of northern Morocco that Islam is now coming from the European side of the Mediterranean with devout returning migrants who are often considered to be more 'true Muslims' than local ones. The ordeals of being a minority in a non-Islamic environment is said to strengthen Muslim devotion. Moreover, migrant communities across the Mediterranean have more freedom in creating associations than in Morocco. This shifting of an Islamic frontier is a challenging topic for scholars of contemporary Islam.

Revival of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism?

A seaward perspective not only pays privileged attention to the sea and the people who use and cross it, but indeed also to the sea as a settlement, a formation that has received scant attention in the humanities and social sciences. The recent renaissance of Mediterranean seaports – Marseille, Barcelona, Genoa, Alexandria, but also smaller ones, such as Alexandria and Koper – constitutes a fascinating field for interdisciplinary area research. The following questions may be raised. Are the maritime towns cities of cultural convergence? What role did they play in the different stages of the globalization process? Less sweeping questions include notions of maritime nation, the impact of the port on town life, changing attitudes of coast-dwellers towards the sea, the revivalization of maritime identity, and its relationship with ethnicity, nationality, and transnationality.

Especially the link between Mediterranean seaports and the passages and connexio of scholars of contemporary Islam.

Notes
1 See Oriens Comment, 89 (1996), a special issue of The Geographical Review. For the Indian Ocean area see A. Wink, From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: Medieval/History in Geographic Perspectives. Special issue of Society and History 44 (2002): 415-44.
2 See M. Juntunen, Between Morocco and Spain. Alien, Migrant Smuggling and a Dispersed Moroccan Community (Valencia Institute for Asian and African Studies, 2002).
3 Hend Driessen, Cultural Anthropology and Mediterranean Studies, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: H.Driessen@few.leidenuniv.nl