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The Mediterranean  
HENK DRIESSEN

# A Seaward View on a Transitional Region

In the last few years there has been an upsurge of scholarly interest in the circum-Mediterranean area as part of a wider academic movement to rethink and revitalize area studies. As a transitional zone the Mediterranean area has always had a somewhat uncertain, marginal, and ambivalent position in the field of established area specializations, which until recently were defined by rather rigid and arbitrary geo-political boundaries. 'The Middle East', a product of the strategic thinking of 19<sup>th</sup>-century 'Europe' (itself a problematic 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.

►  
**Beach scene  
at the port of  
Alexandria.**

Anthropologists and to a lesser extent geographers and historians have largely avoided the Mediterranean Sea as if they suffered from hydrophobia. Almost all statements on 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 but also the geographical perspective has been marked by terracentrism. Though this inland orientation is hardly surprising, it is nevertheless biased.<sup>1</sup>

The study of the circum-Mediterranean area, with an emphasis on *circum*, should not neglect the sea, because it has made possible a relatively easy transport of people, goods, and ideas. The primacy of the sea and of a maritime 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. Of all 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 the northern and southern shores. The recent finding of a series of early-palaeolithic 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 topics deserving 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 altogether negative role in Mediterranean cosmologies. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 saw it as a corrupting sea, the easy communications being felt as a threat to the integrity of social order. However, at the same time the Inner Sea was *mare nostrum*, an integral part of the imperial territory and identity. In the Old Testament the sea is depicted as a plumbless and dark depth hosting the wreckage 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 development of a maritime culture on the southern and eastern shores of the Inner Sea. The incompatibility of sea life with Islam goes a long way to explain why Muslims missed the boat at the time of maritime expansion towards the New World, when there was still a relative power balance between Cross and Crescent in the Mediterranean area. To be sure, there are many exceptions to these generalizations and they deserve systematic 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 coast-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 shores, making up one-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, mass tourism has 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 relationships, 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 theme for further inquiry.

The massive counter-movement of Mediterranean migrants to the North is an equally sweeping phenomenon that needs en-

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 passages and connections 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 are said to strengthen Muslim devotion. Moreover, migrant communities across the Mediterranean have more freedom in creating associations than in Morocco.<sup>2</sup> This shifting of the 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 seaport, a settlement form that has received only scant treatment in the humanities and social sciences. The recent renaissance of Mediterranean seaports – Marseille, Barcelona, Genua, Alexandria, but also smaller ones, such as Algeciras and Koper – constitutes a fascinating field for interdisciplinary area research. The following questions may be raised: Are the maritime towns and cities foci of cultural convergence? What role did they play in the different stages of the globalization process? Less sweeping questions include notions of maritime urbanity, the impact of the port on town life, changing attitudes of coast-dwellers towards the sea, the revitalization of maritime identity, and its relationship with ethnicity, nationality, and transnationality.

Especially the link between Mediterranean seaports and cosmopolitanism is a promising research topic. If there is an ecological dimension to cosmopolitanism then the seaport is certainly one of its main nich-

es, until recently probably the most important one. Awareness and knowledge of and openness towards the wider world have always been ingredients of maritime culture. What is of particular interest is *how* and *in which* contexts Mediterranean people, past and present, evoke cosmopolitanism; the meanings they attach to it; and how they assimilate understandings of cosmopolitanism into their behaviour. Greek refugees from former Smyrna and their descendants in Piraeus, old families in Tangier, Trieste, and Alexandria, frequently evoke a past defined as cosmopolitan. In doing so they stress, in varying combinations, features such as ethnic-religious plurality, multi-lingualism, cultural refinement, openness, enterprise, tolerance, and intercultural exchange.

Thus, a basic question is whether the revival of seaports in parts of the circum-Mediterranean area goes hand in hand with a renewed emphasis on cosmopolitanism under changing political, economic, and technological conditions (think, for instance, of the impact of tourism, migration, and the mass media). In order to answer this broad question an interdisciplinary approach is needed in which a political-economic perspective is joined with a cultural and historical one and a broad gamut of research techniques and sources are combined. This implies a need not only for multi-local but also (and rather) for trans-local anthropological, geographical, and historical research – in other words, research *on* and *in* the connections and passages between different localities and identities around the Mediterranean Sea. And, finally, it means a willingness to reconsider old regional categories and divisions such as 'Europe', 'North Africa', and 'the Middle East'.

*This article is a summary of Henk Driessen's inaugural lecture held at the University of Nijmegen on 28 June 2002. For references, see Henk Driessen, Mediterranean passages. Een zeevaartse visie op een overganggebied (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Wereldbibliotheek, 2002).*

### Notes

1. See *Oceans Connect*, 89 (1999), 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 Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 416–45.
2. See M. Juntunen, *Between Morocco and Spain. Men, Migrant Smuggling and a Dispersed Moroccan Community* (Helsinki: Institute for Asian and African Studies, 2002).

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