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The Mediterranean: What, Why, and How[1]

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Many of us who study the Mediterranean have been confronted with surprise and even disbelief that such a subject could be considered a legitimate field of study. Yet we all accept the traditional "area studies" concentrations in Latin America, the Slavic countries, the Middle East, and East Asia, among others. Why, then, is there so much resistance to the idea of Mediterranean Studies? Perhaps the fact that it is a sea and not a contained landmass, or that it represents disparate cultures, makes it seem different and less appropriate as an individual field of study. But clearly, there is a scholarly movement focused on the geographical, historical and cultural Mediterranean that is gaining strength worldwide. It is my purpose to illustrate the contours of this new field of study in terms of its *raison d'être* and the logistical structures in academe that support it. My title posits three questions: What is the Mediterranean? Why should we study the Mediterranean? How can we study the Mediterranean?

I. What is the Mediterranean?

The Mediterranean Sea means the sea in the middle of the earth, from the Latin *medius* (the middle or between) and *terra* (land or earth). The term was coined by the Romans, though it was a late usage that seems to have first been used in the 3rd century AD, by the geographer Solinus (as reported by Isidore of Seville in the 6th century).[2] Of course, the parts of the

[1] This is a revised version of a talk given at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies at the Pusan University of Foreign Studies in Korea on September 25, 2009 (the 2,489th anniversary of the Battle of Salamis).
[2] Kai Brodersen, "Mediterranean Sea and Region," in M. Gagarin and E. Fantham, eds., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (New York, 2010), v. 4, 387.

Mediterranean Sea have always had their own specific names, such as the Tyrrhenian, Ionian, Adriatic, or Aegean. Initially the Romans referred to the whole sea as *Mare magnum* (the Great Sea), *Mare internum* (the Interior Sea), or *Mare nostrum* (Our Sea), but from Late Antiquity, *Mare mediterraneum* has been the most favored term. If we look at a map, the Mediterranean Sea appears remarkably self-contained. The single opening at Gibraltar allows water from the Atlantic Ocean to flow into the Mediterranean. Without that inflow, the Mediterranean Sea would dry up.

Having considered the name and geographical location, we return to our question, "What is the Mediterranean?" Is it the Mediterranean Sea, and so defined as a body of water? The sea is at once an easy medium for trade and communication among disparate cultures on the shores of the Mediterranean. And at the same time it has been a barrier or frontier between cultures. In the 16th century, for example, the Mediterranean Sea marked the borders between Christianity and Islam. And indeed it was on the sea that the great Battle of Lepanto was fought in 1571 that stabilized that border and generally halted the advance of the Turks in the Mediterranean.

The most common approach, however, is to define the Mediterranean as the Mediterranean Region, namely, all the countries that touch its shore. Such a regional approach makes sense, but we must not forget the lands in the sea—the islands. The Mediterranean has a number of very large islands, such as Sicily, Sardinia, Crete, and Cyprus that have truly been political, cultural, and religious crossroads. There are also islands like Rhodes and Malta that have served as barriers or bulwarks against conquest. And this leads us to consider the important interactions between man, the land, and the sea. The great French historian Fernand Braudel taught that the geography and climate of the Mediterranean region shaped the cultures that developed along its shores. In his great work, *The Mediterranean*, originally published in 1949 in

French, the physical presence of the Mediterranean is felt throughout the book and can almost be seen to be the major protagonist.[3]

But perhaps the most complete definition of the Mediterranean is to see it as a Mediterranean Culture, defined by ideas and customs created by people living on the islands and surrounding countries of the Mediterranean Sea. For me, as an intellectual historian, it must be the culture and ideas of the people of the Mediterranean that are most important. Braudel is of course correct to identify the unique geography and climate of the Mediterranean region that has shaped how people lived and flourished. Building on Braudel's awareness of geography, we can consider how people and sea interacted to create the cultures and ideas of the Mediterranean. The islands of the Mediterranean can be seen as crossroads and meeting points for different cultures and religions. And indeed, over the course of history, several world cultures have developed in the Mediterranean region.

II. Why should we study the Mediterranean?

The Mediterranean region is of fundamental importance to history. For ancient history it is where Egypt, one of the oldest civilizations began. Two other civilizations worth mentioning are Minoan Crete and the Phoenicians. While the exquisite frescoes from Minoan Crete and the nearby island of Thera and the Minoans' cryptic Linear A script will continue to excite the imagination,[4] the Phoenicians are far more important for the larger Mediterranean. The Phoenicians were the first to explore the Mediterranean Sea and establish colonies far from their home cities in the Levant. While their most famous colony was Carthage, in modern Tunisia, they also established colonies in Spain (Cartagena and Cadiz) and traded as far away as

[3] F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 3 vols. (1949; rev. ed. 1966).
[4] J. Bennet, "Minoan civilization," in S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds., *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 1996), 986.

Cornwall.[5] According to Herodotus (4.42) a Phoenician expedition even circumnavigated Africa. Finally, the Phoenicians are important for developing an early version of the alphabet. The Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet to fit their own language around 800 BC, and it is this early Greek alphabet from which most western alphabets derive.[6]

In terms of cultural history, the Mediterranean region is where the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome originated. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of Greco-Roman classical civilization and its re-conceptualization in the Italian Renaissance. There is a vast body of literature on the contributions of these civilizations to our own, but we merely need to look around at our architecture, our institutions, our art, and our values to see the continuity of Western Civilization, all of which has its origin in the Mediterranean region.

For religious history it is where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated. Who can doubt the importance and significance of these religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, for many millions of people around the world? Many other parts of the globe as a result share a religious tradition that originated in the Mediterranean.

For the history of world empires, the Roman Empire revolved around the Mediterranean to such an extent that the Romans commonly referred to it as "our sea" (*mare nostrum*) or "the internal sea" (*mare internum*, e.g. Sallust , *Bellum Iugurthinum* 17).[7] More recently, the Mediterranean region is where the Portuguese and Spanish global empires began. From the Iberian Peninsula explorers and traders carried Mediterranean languages, culture and ideas to the New World and then completely around the globe. Thus we can speak of "Latin" America as culturally and linguistically Mediterranean. For economic history, the Mediterranean region is

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[5] L. E. Stager, "Phoenician Shipwrecks in the Deep Sea," in *From Sidon to Huelva: Searoutes: Interconnections in the Mediterranean, 16th-6th c. BC* (2003), 233-48.
[6] J. W. Price, "Alphabet, Greek," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford, 1996), 66.
[7] Kai Brodersen, "Mediterranean Sea and Region," in M. Gagarin and E. Fantham, eds., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (New York, 2010), v. 4, 387.

where the Catalans, Genoese, and Venetians created the banking structure we still use today. The Mediterranean has always been a center for trade and business, and it is no surprise that modes of banking developed there.

III. How can we study the Mediterranean?

Scholars who study the Mediterranean region, like others in the humanities, have long worked and researched on our own. We have not tended to collaborate as have our colleagues in other disciplines. But even so, there are institutions, journals, and organizations that support our work and bring us together. Below is a partial list of some of the institutes and programs for Mediterranean studies and some of the journals that focus on the Mediterranean region and its peoples.

Institutes and Programs

- I must first of all note the Institute for Mediterranean Studies at the Pusan University of Foreign Studies, which is one of several such research centers around the world. Also in Asia is the Institute for Mediterranean Studies at Waseda University in Japan. In Australia is the Trendall Research Centre for Ancient Mediterranean Studies at La Trobe University.
- In Europe we may note the the Institute for Mediterranean Studies at the University of Lugano, Switzerland; the Maison méditerranéenne, in Aix-en-Provence, France; the Centre for Mediterranean Studies at the University of Exeter, in England; the Centre for Euro-Mediterranean Studies at the University of Reading, in England. We should not

forget the new Program in Mediterranean Studies at the John Paul II Catholic University in Lublin, Poland, discussed in the following article.

- In the Mediterranean region itself there is the Mediterranean Institute at the University of Malta; the FORTH Institute of Mediterranean Studies in Crete, Greece; the Athens Institute for Education and Research, in Greece; the Instituto Europeo del Mediterráneo in Barcelona, Spain; the Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI) in Portorož, Slovenia; the Institute of Mediterranean Studies at Alexandria University in Egypt; and the Center for Mediterranean Civilizations at Tel Aviv University in Israel.
- In North America we should mention the Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies at the University of Toronto; the Center for European and Mediterranean Studies at New York University; the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies at Tufts University, Massachusetts; the Center for Integrative Mediterranean Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (in collaboration with the University of Messina, in Italy, and Cordoba University, in Spain); the McGhee Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies of Georgetown University (located in Turkey); and, the Mediterranean Studies Forum at Stanford University, California.

There are, in addition, a number of departments of Mediterranean Studies and programs in Mediterranean Studies, mostly in North American and European universities.

Journals

- *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* (Routledge; Society for the Medieval Mediterranean, Centre for Mediterranean Studies at the University of Exeter) 1988; 2

issues per year. Devoted to the study of all aspects of the Arabo-Islamic medieval Mediterranean studies.

- *Ancient West & East* (Peeters) 2001; annual. Presents the history and archaeology of the periphery of the Graeco-Roman world, with an emphasis on local societies and cultures and their interaction with the Graeco-Roman, Near Eastern and early Byzantine worlds.
- *International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies* (Euro-Mediterranean University [EMUNI]) 2008; 2 issues per year. An interdisciplinary forum dedicated to examining issues in the intersections of humanities and social studies in the Euro-Mediterranean area.
- *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* (University of Malta) 1991; 2 issues per year. Interdisciplinary journal devoted to the Mediterranean, publishing original scholarship in anthropology, archaeology and the history, literature, religions, culture and society of Southern Europe and North Africa in both historical and modern periods.
- *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* (University of the Aegean, Rhodes, Greece) 2001; 2 or 3 issues a year. It focuses on the Mediterranean region and on matters referred to interactions of Mediterranean with neighboring areas, but presents an international forum of research, innovations, discoveries, applications and meetings, concerning the modern approaches to the study of human past.
- *Mediterranean Chronicle* (Ionian University, Corfu, Greece) 2011; annual. Aims at promoting a discussion of the cultures of the Mediterranean world, focusing on the Greek and Roman world, although Medieval and Byzantine culture are also included.

- *Mediterranean Historical Review* (Routledge; Center for Mediterranean Civilizations at Tel Aviv University) 1986; 2 issues per year. Provides an international forum for topics on the ancient, medieval, and modern history of the Mediterranean basin.
- *Mediterranean Politics* (Routledge) 1994; 3 issues per year. Covers political developments at the national and international levels in the Mediterranean region.
- *Mediterranean Quarterly: A Journal of Global Issues* (Duke University Press; Mediterranean Affairs, Inc.) 1989; 4 issues per year. Accounts for many of the changes that are redefining the world order. This unique publication delivers global issues with a Mediterranean slant and regional struggles of global impact.
- *Mediterranean Review* (Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Pusan University of Foreign Studies, Korea) 2008; 2 issues per year. Addresses Mediterranean regional affairs and discusses crucial developments in culture and politics. It addresses global issues, such as Mediterranean influence on international affairs, and its multicultural dimensions.
- *Mediterranean Studies* (Pennsylvania State University Press; Mediterranean Studies Association) 1989; 2 issues per year. An interdisciplinary publication reflecting the broad history of the Mediterranean basin from ancient to modern times. Intended for a scholarly audience, the journal is particularly concerned with the ideas and ideals of western Mediterranean cultures and the influence of these ideas beyond the region's geographical boundaries.
- *Scripta Mediterranea* (Canadian Institute for Mediterranean Studies) 1980; annual. Studies all aspects of Mediterranean culture and civilization, past and present.

This brief survey of the programs, institutes, and journals devoted to the study of the Mediterranean region provides ample proof that the study of the Mediterranean is a vibrant and growing field. And while we can certainly agree with Fernand Braudel that geography and climate are key players in the study of the Mediterranean, ultimately history is about people. What is special about the Mediterranean is that, because it is a contained and sheltered sea, it allows for an intense interaction among different peoples. The history of the Mediterranean is one of human co-existence and confrontation in terms of trade, religion, culture, and politics—indeed sometimes leading to conquest and warfare. Finally, let me end with a quotation from Fernand Braudel: "it is my belief that all the problems posed by the Mediterranean are of exceptional human richness, and that they must therefore interest all."[8]

[8] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II,* translated by Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), v. 1, 19.