I would like to start our meeting with an interesting quotation of a passage in inverted commas from the important book of the English historian David Abulafia, *The Great Sea*:

“Known in English and the romance languages as the sea ‘between the lands – Meditaustrainum - , the Mediterranean goes and has gone by many names: “Our Sea” for the Romans (mare Nostrum), the “White Sea” (Akdeniz) for the Turks, the “Great Sea” (Yam gadol) for the Jews, the “Middle Sea” (Mittelmeer) for the Germans and, more doubtfully the “Great Green” for the ancient Egyptians.

Modern writers have added to the vocabulary, coining epithets such as the “inner Sea”, the “Encircled See”, the “Friendly Sea”, the “Faithful Sea” of several religions, the “Bitter Sea” of the Second World War, the “Corrupting Sea” of dozens of micro-ecologies transformed by their relationship with neighbours who supply what they lack, and to which they can offer their own surpluses; the “Liquid Continent” that, like a real continent, embraces many peoples, cultures and economies within a spaces with precise edges”.

So, there is a preliminary question that we cannot avoid:
What is the Mediterranean?

Obviously no single brief answer can be given to that question.
But we can, at a preliminary stage, introduce two essential topics:
The first of them is the long history of how the Mediterranean Sea has been envisaged, beginning with the earliest traceable origins of the notion that its waters constitute a single entity. The second, which we would not separate too sharply from the first, is the “scientific” definition of the Mediterranean’s physical geography: the established answer to the question of what makes it a region as well as a sea.
These related topics allow us to introduce the two principal ways in which Mediterranean unity has been characterized: by reference either to ease of communications, which we may conveniently label the interactionist approach, or to common physical features, the ecologizing approach. According to Horden and Purcell, an interactionist theory is likely to emphasize the sea as a relational medium, a network of routes and exchanges; an ecologizing one is likely to offer generalized description of Mediterranean hinterlands. There is a set of common features in the physical geography of Mediterranean lands. The Mediterranean climate, of hot dry summers and mild rainy winters, the climatic effect of the sea, the recurring structural and petrological patterns of the coast lands, or the distinctive natural vegetation that reflects soil as well as climate, some agricultural products that constitutes the Mediterranean diet (olive trees, harvest, wine): from this angle a history “close to the soil”.

But, the two approaches are, of course, by no means mutually exclusive.

For Horden and Purcell (The Corrupting Sea), the history of the Mediterranean is defined by two categories: fragmentation and connectivity. They argue that the Mediterranean region is distinguished by its unusual ecological diversity, a diversity that creates a fragmented landscape of “microregions” that are defined by both their physical environment and by patterns of human interaction with that environment. In fact, they argue, each microregion is not just the sum of its parts, but is defined by constantly changing interactions with other microregions. This dense web of interaction is what they call connectivity, and it is driven by the need to manage risk through exchange. The authors conclude “dense fragmentation complemented by a striving towards control of communications may be an apt summary of the Mediterranean past”.

For David Abulafia (The Great Sea. A Human History of the Mediterranean), At first glance the boundaries of the Med appear well defined by the coastline that runs from the rock of Gibraltar along Spain and southern France, around Italy and Greece to Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and then the entire coast of North Africa as far as Ceuta, the Spanish town on the tip of Morocco, opposite to Gibraltar. But Mediterranean cannot simply be defined by its edges. Within this space there are also dozens of islands which have enormous significance for the history of Med.: the largest is Sicily, closely followed by Sardinia, but any historian of Mediterranean would also wish to lay heavy stress upon the importance of Crete and Cyprus, as well as much smaller islands such as Santorini, the home of a flourishing prehistoric
culture, or Elba, source of iron to the Etruscan, and so on (Corsica, Malta, the many islands between the Greek and Turkish mainlands and along the coast of Croatia.

The first question is whether to identify the Med in terms of its water, its islands, its coasts or indeed the civilizations and states that have emerged along its coasts.

For the highly influential French historian Fernand Braudel (The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Paris 1947, 1967 IInd ed) what was important was the way the physical geography of Med moulded the civilizations that grew up on its shores and a long way inland. His was a view that laid a considerable emphasis on the physical constraints that had determined human behaviours. But one of the first historians of the Mediterranean, the Greek Thucydides (…. History of the Peloponnesian Wars), from a very different point of view, stresses the ways in which sea empires (or thalassocracies) are created and shows an exceptional understanding of the political rivalries. What is important here is enhancing his sense of what would now be called geopolitics (a word that only came into use in the second half of the twentieth century). In fact, Thucydides trounces Braudel by showing an understanding of the human element in the making of Mediterranean history.

In fact, a history of the Med could be written, in the light of present knowledge, as the ups and downs of the many civilizations that have flourished by the shores of the Great Sea: Egyptians, Minoans, Mycenaeans, Greeks, Etruscan, Byzantines, Arabs... and so on, making a sort of encyclopaedia of human history in the area where three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa met. That this region had an absolutely fundamental importance in the history of the entire planet cannot be denied: whether it is the cultural history of the world, with its roots in the classical civilization of Athens, Rome, Renaissance Italy; whether it is the religious history of the world, so significantly shaped by Judaism, Christianity and Islam; whether it is the history of empire, in which the Iberian peninsula has played such a dominant role; whether it is the economic history in this planet, in which Genoese, Venetians and Catalans helped mould the commercial institutions with which we still operate, and so on. But the real challenge and the core of the historical research is not to write the history of each the societies that developed within the Mediterranean space, but to understand how contemporaneous societies interacted with one another across the sea.

Of course, all seas both join and divide landmasses. But what was important about the Mediterranean lands is the scale of the challenge posed by the sea, and the relative ease of
movement that is possible with its compass compared to the open ocean. The history of Med Sea is a history of coexistence, commercial, cultural, religious, political, as well as a history of confrontation between neighbours aware of their often powerful ethnic, economic and religious differences. Ecological questions certainly cannot be ignored: but to the historian their great importance lies first of all in the living conditions that they imposed on human settlers, and second in the ways the settles subsequently modified the environment. In writing the history of the Med it is essential to write a human history of the Med Sea expressed through the commercial, cultural and religious interaction that took place across its surface.

First, then, the perception of the sea. We should not take its unity as an uncontroversial geographical datum. Before the development of satellites, the Med as a whole was invisible. Its component waters were each more naturally experienced as independent and the Mediterranean, with certain learned exceptions as Thucydides in the classical time, has been a geographical expression for many centuries. Maps illustrating the Mediterranean Sea that have been preserved today from antiquity and the medieval period were not intended to be used as a modern map might be. For the most parte, they were theological maps, or historical narratives, or entertainments, or plans for dreams of ambitious rulers. It was not until the rise of portolans (The term “portolan” derives from the written lists of port – or itineraries – long used by the Mediterranean sailors) that maps reflected maritime and travel narratives, and, even then, most extant portolans are vivid and highly decorative statements of power and dominion and not guides for sailors.

In the ancient geographical tradition the sea shapes the land, not the other way about. The logical priority of the sea resulted principally from the centrality of the sea to communication. The practice of navigation brought into existence another representation of the unity of these waters: the space of the sea is conceived as a linear route defined by a sequence of harbours of natural feature. The Med came indeed to be regarded as like a great river. And so it appears on a late Roman map, the Peutinger table, where the sea is grossly elongated.

The claim of the Romans to their sea was part of a political and cultural process by which they progressively defined the place of Rome at the heart of an Inhabited World – an Oecumen or Orbis Terrarum with the Med at its centre. For many Medieval map makers of Mappae Mundi (Maps of the World), the Mediterranean was simply a line demarcating Europe from the other two continents (Africa and Asia). This is evident, for example, in the so-called T-O maps, where the known world is surrounded by a circular sea (the O, that is the Ocean or Outer Sea) and an Inner See, the Mediterranean,
dividing the three continents. The Christian topography interpreted the T as the cross of Christ erected over the world (based on the Mediterranean as its centre) as the universal sign of Christian salvation.

All these maps, and others similar to them, were theological, political and historical statements.

The Arab tradition portrayed the sea as poor and uninviting, but by and large as a unity – a single sea full of islands, whose integrity was maintained by its geographers despite obvious pressures to divide it conceptually between Islam and the rest of the world. In the tenth century Islamic maps were made primarily by a group of Arabic scholars whom we group today under the rubric “the Balkhi school”. A typical world map produced by the “Balkhi School” is circular, with the south at the top. A more readable representation is the map of the Arab cartographer Al-Idrisi (XII c.). As in the Balkhi Map the Mediterranean comes in from the right (west) as an elongated oval, while a much larger and more amorphous Indian Ocean enters from the left (East). Both waters connect with a dark blue ring that encloses the map and represents the “Surrounding Sea”. In the Mediterranean Sea there are three large islands: Cyprus, Crete and Sicily.

In the eleventh century an utterly different method of mapping the Mediterranean Sea developed in Egypt. In the next slide I would like to show you an example of a very unusual of these Mediterranean maps by an anonymous Book of Curiosity, a sort of collected voyages through sea and lands.

In this map, the Mediterranean or “western Sea” (al-bahr al gharbi) – “western” as related to the eastern Sea, that is the Indian Ocean - is depicted as a completely closed and perfectly symmetrical oval. Around the periphery, 121 anchorages on the mainland are described with information on winds and landmarks. The dark green sea itself is crammed with 118 islands, all circles of uniform size except for Sicily and Cyprus (that are rectangular). The design represents a very different conception of mapmaking and reflects the maritime interests of the mapmaker.

It was not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the “voyages of discovery” that the two geographies – the abstract and the pragmatic, the ideology and the geography, the imagination and the reality – were welded together.

The rise of portolan charts – beginning in Europe with the eleventh century and flourishing in Catalonia and Italy reflects increased interest in maps illustrating travel, trade and naval
expeditions. But the maps are more statements of power and dominion than useful nautical
guides for navigating the Mediterranean Sea. So, portolan charts are notable for the absence of
any mathematical coordinates at the edges of their rectangular frames by which latitude and
longitude could be estimated.

Now, coming back to the historical sketch of the turning point of the Mediterranean history,
with a major focus to the Early Modern Mediterranean.
Contributions from ancient historians trace the gradual integration of the Mediterranean into
a space unified first by cultural constructs and commercial networks and then — in the age of
Rome — by government and administrative structures as well. They look at the trade links
and cultural contacts between the four major kingdoms of the Bronze Age — the Hittites, the
Egyptians, the Minoans, and the Mesopotamians — and trace the development of the
Mediterranean-wide Mycenaean and Phoenician trading networks. Then,
they describe the struggle between Phoenicians and Greeks over profitable colonies and
trading posts. Finally, they explain Rome increasing economic and its political and military
engagement with the Mediterranean, culminating in the creation of what the Romans called
*Mare Nostrum* (Our Sea).

The differentiation with antiquity (the Roman Empire and the “classical” period) is marked by
the end of the political and economic unity that characterized the Med under Roman
domination. The slow but inexorable crumbling of the Roman Empire ended the political unity
of the Mediterranean permanently, and the successive centuries introduced a number of new
contenders for
Mediterranean hegemony. Invaders from the north, south, and east — Visigoths, Vandals,
Arabs,
Bulgars, Turks — brought their own languages and cultural patterns to the region with its
political fragmentation. Significantly, the Arabs brought a new religion, Islam, which shaped
the region’s religious culture, together with the varieties of Christianity that had taken hold in
the waning days of the Roman Empire and its partition.
The emergence of Islam as of new kingdoms led to a construction of a shared med, disputed
particularly, but not only, between Christians and Muslims. What defines the medieval Med
compared to the early modern period (when trade networks widely expanded across the
world after the discovery of America (1492), is its central place in the trade networks in a
world economy in formation, a centrality that increase during the late Middle Ages, only to be
partly lost after the discovery of America and the circumnavigation of Africa. As a central space where no power could completely triumph despite the hegemonic aspirations of the most powerful states, the medieval Mediterranean was thus a border—a place both for exchanges, which became more intensive over time, and for political, ideological and economic competition. Historiography oscillates between two poles: the image of a world criss-crossed by merchants, ships, regulated by peace treaties and by the values of the mercantile world—an image that combines nostalgic memories of the unity and peace of Roman times with the ideal of an Andalusian *convivencia* between Christians, Jews and Muslims; and the dark image of a sea of wars, dominated by the centuries-old confrontation between cross and crescent—crusade, jihad, piracy, their corollary at sea—but also by the competition between great powers with hegemonic aspirations. But, if some periods were marked by an intensification of conflicts, more often the exchanges and conflicts coexisted, and the increase of maritime trade encourages both completion for control of strategic ports and shipping routes and the search for diplomatic agreements promoting trade.

In the seventh century, the emergence of Islam opened a conflict between universal monotheistic religions, mainly with Byzantium at first, then with the Latin powers of Western Europe. It would be wrong, however, to reduce the wars in the Med to this religious conflict, even in the age of the Crusades: wars between Muslim powers (Fatimid against Umayyad, for example) or Christian ones (Genoa, Pisa, Venice and the Crown of Aragon) were much more numerous and persist. The Muslim conquest, including some of the most historic cities of the Roman Christendom—Jerusalem, Alexandria, Carthage—(Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire by the time of the emperor Constantine) brought out a new regional power and a new source of conflicts, thus contributing also to the break-up of the Roman unity of the Mediterranean in late antiquity. From that time onwards Muslims and Christians faced each others across the Med and for almost as long historians have been debating the consequences of that divide.

The medieval period, in contrast, is characterized by completion between regional powers for both political and economic control of the Mediterranean and its networks. The scholars focus on the era of Christian conquest, tracing the growing naval and commercial strength of the Italian city-states (Genoa, Venice, Pisa and Amalfi) from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries. And many of them see the Crusades as a part of this process, stating that “the direct
effect of the crusades is the Mediterranean became a Latin Sea and Latin merchants displaced Jews and Muslim merchants”.

But beyond that permanent competition – the military competition for political dominion and the commercial competition for control of exchange network – the Middle Ages were above all a moment of the construction of modalities of interactions in a shared space, of the control and regulation of both exchanges and conflicts. This construction proceeded through the numerous diplomatic negotiations of the period (aided by the work of jurists) and, above all, by the increase of shared practices that eventually became general customs in the Med. This progressive construction of rules for this “in-between” space permitted the re-creation of a sort of unity in front of what had been lost after the fall of the Roman Empire. What was at stake was the guarantee of freedom and security for the circulation of men and goods, but also the regulation of violence, private and public in other words, the definition of the rules of war and peace. Bilateral treaties, on the other hand, developed rules accepted by both sides (Muslims and Christians). All these treaties made it possible to distinguish, at sea as on land, enemies from those who were protected by a peace treaty. This distinction was never, however made according to religious criteria (faithful versus infidel), only by purely political ones (existence or not of a peace treaty), even while ideology and discourses (and also, in Islam, the Law) foregrounded these religious distinctions as the basis of the Muslims and Christians relations. Religious affiliation was just on element on the diplomatic game. This legal framework finally allowed the organization of communities of merchants in port cities, groped by nationes in fondacos, and under the political rule of their consul. The ports, with their cosmopolitanism, their commerce based prosperity, but also their tensions and sometimes violence, were the mirrors and the symbols of this new multicultural Mediterranean.

Almost a millennium after the Arab conquest a new Islamic power once again reached the shores of the Med. The Ottomans emerged from the chaotic thirteenth-century milieu. Over the next century-and-a-half they dispensed with their Turkish rivals, entered and conquered the Balkans and, most dramatically put an end to the 1000-year Byzantine Empire, when they took the capital Constantinople in May of 1453. In the following century they became masters of the Arab heartland; Syria and Egypt were added to the Ottoman domains in 1516, and 1517 respectively. At the same time pirate-entrepreneurs, the most famous of which was Khaireddin Barbarossa, were entering into alliances with the North African rulers who were
threatened by Spain. By the 1530’s this informal relationship has evolved into formal incorporation into the Empire. In the same decade Barbarossa, now Suleiman’s naval commander, conquered many of the Aegean islands (most notable Crete and Chios), although important Venetian and Genoese colonies remained.

Thus by the beginning of the early modern period the era of political fragmentation was over and there was, once again, a great Islamic empire. But this empire was a long way from Mesopotamia and the Tigris River. It was instead a Mediterranean empire, with its capital at the north-eastern corner of the sea and possession of the entire Mediterranean littoral except for the north-west coast.

The capture of the great Christian city of Byzantium by infidels was a shocking event. The Turkish warriors who took the Christian capital identified themselves as a dynasty, the Osmanli, or followers of Osman, their founder. In the Western world they are known as the Ottomans and they funded an empire that endured for 600 years.

It is true that their extraordinary advance led to an extended period of warfare with Western powers – most notably Venice and the Habsburg Spain – but, after all, warfare was not exactly new to the Mediterranean. What is more notable is that the Ottomans recreated, and even extended the old imperial unity of the eastern Med that had been most closely associated with Byzantium and, before that, the Roman Empire.

In the spring of 1451 Sultan Mehmet began work on a new fortress on the European side of Bosphorus. We know it today as Rumeli Hisar. With a fortress in each side of the Bosphorus he controlled the traffic between the Black Sea and the Med. Shortly thereafter he declared that every ship sailing through the Bosphorus must stop for inspection; those who disobeyed would be sunk. In Nov of that year a Venetian cog tried to sail through without stopping. The ship was sunk, the crew decapitated and the captain, Antonio Rizzo, impaled. Ottoman merchants took up the gargantuan job of provisioning Istanbul. By the seventeenth century the Black Sea had truly become an exclusive Ottoman lake, which had historically been far more important in provisioning Istanbul than the Mediterranean had ever been.

In the course of the expansion the Ottomans fought repeated wars with the Venitians and especially, the Spanish, who were their arch-enemies in the Mediterranean.

Through the XVI c. a number of places in the central and western Med changed hands several times or were fiercely contested. Philip II of Spain failed to take Jerba in 1529; and five years later the Ottomans gave up their siege of Malta, the key to command the sea for the whole of
southern and western Europe. In 1530 the Knights of St. John (Hospitallers), driven from Rhodes, had occupied it. 35 years later (1565) the Turks launched a huge attack, its number estimated to be over 30,000, opposed by the Gran Master, Jean de la Vallette, with less than 10,000 Christians. After five months of bitter fighting and heavy losses on both sides, the Turks abandoned the siege.

The Ottomans wrested Algiers away in 1529, but the Spanish managed to hold on to Oran until 1708. Spanish conquest east of Algiers was reversed by the end of XVIth c. Then there were spectacular sea battles, such as Lepanto (1571), where no territory changed hands but naval losses were nevertheless extensive. Lepanto was the last naval battle fought with galleys between the Turks and the combined fleets of Venice, Genoa and Spain under Don John of Austria. It was a particular bloody battle, the Turks losing 25,000 men and the European 8,000. Although a technical victory for the latter, both sides were in fact left so exhausted that neither could pursue the advantage, and the result was a stalemate.

The unification of the eastern Med basin under the Ottomans in the XVIth c. was no a boon for the capital city (Istanbul or Alexandria?). Through the Medieval period the western Med had been tightly integrated into the long-distance luxury and spice trade that originated in Asia. Muslim Spain was one place where East and West (or more properly North and South) met and exchanged goods. A solid block of Islamic states stretching from Arabia to Iberia linked the two great seas, the Med and the Indian Ocean and merchants moved easily across this vast territory.

The Spanish *reconquista* and the rise of Italian mercantile republics put an end to this world. The nexus between East and West moved to the eastern Med where it would stay until the XVII c. The Ottoman Empire ended a long period of Italian hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean, redirecting the trade networks away from the international routes pioneered by Venetians and Genoese and towards a servicing of the imperial capital. With the conquest of Syria and Egypt, the Ottomans benefited from the revenues of the spice route through the Red Sea. A highly developed regional economy based on the provisioning of Istanbul existed side by side with the great international cities – Bursa, Cairo, Aleppo – which were now the meeting points of East and West.

Right up through the eighteenth century inter Ottoman trade was superior in value to foreign trade. Bit far from promoting a strict Islamic resurgence, the sultans used their strength to benefit indigenous merchants and mariners across the board. Ottoman Christians probably benefitted more than their Muslim counterparts from the departure of the Italians.
Imperial Islam
With the defeat of first the Byzantines and then the Mamluks, the Ottomans put an end to a very long period of political fragmentation in the eastern Med.
Secure in their position of as leaders of Islamic world the sultans of the XV and XVI c. sponsored a brilliant revival of high cultural life, as well as the strengthening of Islamic civilization in the Mediterranean basin.
In the Balkans the Ottomans pursued an energetic programme of urbanization. Cities like Sarajevo and Mostar were Ottoman creation; while other places, such as Plovdiv (in today’s Bulgaria) and Kavalla (in today’s Greece) grew from minor towns to great commercial and cultural centres.
Mosques, schools, baths and khans proliferated along with covered markets, aqueducts and monumental bridges (→ The bridge on the Drina).
In the Arab world, Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Under the Ottomans Mamluk Cairo quickly outgrew its limits as Aleppo did in the mid XVI c. between 1500 and 1580 the population of Algiers tripled and, again, the élite commissioned the construction of mosque complexes to meet the social and religious requirements of urban life. At the opposite end of the Med, the Spanish Habsburgs were putting an end to frontier society and its long history of Christian-Muslim coexistence.
After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the attempts to enforce the Moorish population (known as the Moriscos) to adopt Christian faith and to suppress ‘Moorish’ practice after the fall of the Muslim Granada in the same 1492 met with little success.
The Moriscos were officially Christians but against this was the argument that they were seen as potential allies by the Turks, an argument underlined by the constant raids on Spanish coast which had, for ex., devastated Majorca.
It was only in 1609-14 that an expulsion of the Moriscos took place, most transferring to North Africa, where they joined early communities of Andalusis, Muslim of Hispanic descent, in such places as Oran and Bougie. About a quarter of million Moriscos can be shown to have thrown out of Aragon and Valencia.
The Turks adopted a diametrically opposed policy towards religious minorities. They had already welcomed the Spanish Jews, whose artisan skills were well known.
They made Istanbul into a city of a substantial non-Muslim communities flourished, so that a larger Jewish quarter in Galata and very substantial Greek and Armenian settlements (and Genoese).
By the XVIIIth century a semi-official system was in place that accorded honour to the leaders of the religious community such as the Greek Orthodox patriarch, whose authority still extended over large areas of Greece and Asia Minor and the Haham Bashi or chief rabbi of the Jews; they allowed them considerable autonomy in managing the affairs of their community so long as they paid the taxes that were due. It is a system built on the principle of conditional toleration established in the early Islamic empires, now as than necessitated by the existence of a large areas where Islam was a minority religion, though it did gain many new adherents as far west as Bosnia and Albania. The price the Christian communities paid was the levy of young men for the Ottoman army, the famous janissary corps. The Ottoman world combined brutality with a laissez-faire attitude in many areas; it combined economic revival in Istanbul and Smyrna with economic decline in Albania and Greece, areas caught in the conflict between Spain and turkey.

For the first time in many centuries, the Orthodox Church was backed, even if for reasons of Realpolitik, by a strong and expanding military power. The Ottomans continued the policy which Muslim rulers had followed since Saladin’s recover of Jerusalem in the 12th c.: to play the Latin and the Orthodox Churches against each other. This was in order to prevent the formation of a united Christian front, which could threaten the Empire. The Ottomans and the Orthodox Church shared an interest in reining in the Latins who had, after all, launched the Crusades and, later on, played such a dominant role in the Byzantine Empire. The revival of the Orthodox Church followed apace.

When it comes to discussions of the marginalization of the Mediterranean it is important to distinguish between two levels of marginalization. The date for one is 1492, while the date for the other is less definitive but at any rate comes a century later, The 1492, of course, refers to Columbus’s arrival in the New World although the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope is just as important. Here marginalization refers to the changing place of the Mediterranean in world trade networks.

The second level of marginalization is a question of the participants in Mediterranean trade. Here the historiography underlines what is called the Northern Invasion, by which it means the entry of northern ships (and northern European powers) – English, Dutch and, to a certain extent France – into the Mediterranean in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, even if it was only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that English commerce in the Americas and in the Indies exceeded that of the Mediterranean.
The decline of Islamic power in the XVIIth and XVIIIth century is a complex issue. The Ottoman defeat outside Vienna by Austrian German and Polish forces in 1683 is often presented as beginning an inevitable process of Ottoman decline that also encompassed the entire Islamic world. In 1717 Belgrade fell to the Austrians, in 1738 the Russians overran the Crimea and in 1827 the Egyptian fleet was smashed off Cape Navarrino, ending Ottoman chances of retaining Greece. But in 1715 the Venetian were driven back from Morea and in 1739 the Austrians were driven back into Belgrade by Ottomans, who retained both Morea and Belgrade into the next century.

Recently, a growing interest in the dynamics of multi-cultural societies and in historical relationships between a Muslim "East" and a Christian "West" has driven a sort of renaissance in the field of Mediterranean Studies. The vision of the Mediterranean articulated by an ever increasing number of books and articles is one of fragmentation within unity, a construct that allows for an almost infinite amount of regional diversity and complexity within a framework of shared environmental opportunity and constraint. Scholars of the Mediterranean now focus on borders, on networks of exchange, and on the way that the interplay of conflict and co-existence allowed for individual and collective negotiations of identity. One of the most welcome developments in recent historiography is the greater integration of the Islamic Mediterranean into scholars’ considerations of the region.

One of the unifying themes in the scholarship on the medieval and early modern Mediterranean over the last decade has been the Christian European engagement with the Muslim world. A number of studies examine Europeans’ rhetorical, ideological, and artistic constructions and representation of individual Muslims, Mamluks, and Ottomans. Many, if not most, of these depictions of Muslim “Others” were negative and unflattering; the question then becomes, unflattering to whom? The emerging consensus from scholars who study these representations is that while these visual and rhetorical images tell us very little about the inhabitants of the southern and eastern reaches of the Mediterranean, they tell us a great deal about Europeans’ ideas about themselves. Europe’s extended interaction with religious, ethnic, and cultural difference is thus essential for understanding the development and self-definition of a recognizably European, Western Christian identity.

A second set of recent works engages with the distinctive forms of culture produced in
Mediterranean societies. The environment of the Mediterranean has led to an unusually high degree of communication and interaction between the societies around the sea. While past scholarship measured this interaction in primarily economic and commercial terms, more recent studies have begun to investigate the effects of this interaction on the level of mentalities. How, precisely, was the material culture, narrative forms, and religious expression shaped by centuries of co-existence and interaction in the Mediterranean?

In the early modern period, Hapsburg Spain and its battles with the Ottoman Empire often serve as the premier example of growing religious and political conflict between expanding world empires.

A number of recent works with an Italian focus engage with the major themes of Mediterranean encounter: merchant culture and commercial exchange, crusade, pilgrimage, and shared sacred geographies.

A theory of the Mediterranean as a discrete object of historical study necessitates defining what is not Mediterranean, or where the limits of a distinctively Mediterranean culture lie. Where are the boundaries of a region defined by connectivity and dense networks of interaction? How can scholars distinguish between the global phenomenon of cross-cultural exchange and the specific types of interactions that occur in a Mediterranean space? The English historian Peter Burke points to the value of historical anthropology — for instance, studies that concentrate on honour and shame, moral values, patronage, hospitality and friendship, or on sacred geography and ritual culture — in writing a history of Mediterranean culture. He proposes that the anthropological concept of “symbolic boundaries” can be useful to historians analysing the cultural and material exchanges on frontiers and borders.

Given the new theoretical understandings of the Mediterranean as a place defined by “connectivity” or dense networks of interaction, it is certainly no surprise that scholars have continued to use trade as an index of cross-cultural encounter.

Merchants were only one of the many groups that crossed Mediterranean boundaries and acted as agents of cultural exchange. Ambassadors, exiles, renegades, sailors, captives, and translators traversed the same maritime networks, creating a transnational Mediterranean
population that defies easy categorizations. The vast majority of these travellers left little or no trace in the historical record; scholars have long relied on the narratives of those who did to trace the pathways and possibilities created by Mediterranean connectivity and to describe the ways individual lived experience intersected with larger social and economic structures. Several recent studies use these liminal individuals and groups to interrogate the construction of national and religious identities in the pre-modern period. This literature rejects oppositional notions of East-West and Muslim-Christian, arguing that these rhetorical categories did not correspond to lived experience. Instead, recent works by Natalie Zemon Davis, Mercedes García-Arenal and Gerard Wiegers, and Eric Dursteler present Mediterranean identity as a contingent process of negotiation. Rather than seeing subjects who exchanged an Eastern identity for a Western one, a Christian identity for a Muslim one, or an Ottoman identity for a Venetian one, the above works all portray complicated and ambiguous interactions of individuals, cultures, and ideologies as they slide past imaginary boundaries.

The protagonist’s lament that opens Amin Maalouf’s novel Leo Africanus, “I come from no country, from no city, from no tribe. I am the son of the road, my country is the caravan, my life the most unexpected of voyages,” articulates the dislocations and ruptures in identity experienced by many in the early modern Mediterranean world. Maalouf fictionalizes the extraordinary story of a real border crosser, alternately known as Al-Hasan al-Wazzan, Giovanni Leone, and Yuhanna al-Asad. Davis’s Trickster Travels chases this elusive traveller through the archives, using his story as a vehicle to “explore how a man moved between different polities, made use of different cultural and social resources, and entangled or separated them so as to survive, discover, write, make relationships and think about society and himself” (11).

Born a Muslim in Granada, al-Wazzan’s family left Iberia for Fez after Ferdinand and Isabella’s conquest of the city in 1492. As an adult, al-Wazzan served as an itinerant diplomat, spy, scholar, and businessman across North and West Africa until he was captured by a Spanish corsair in 1518. Enslaved and sent to the pope in Rome, al-Wazzan converted — at least externally — to Christianity and became Giovanni Leone, author of the geographical treatise History and Description of Africa. He left Rome in 1527, after the city was sacked by Hapsburg armies, and returned with little trace to North Africa. Davis’s account of his story aims to reconstruct not just his movements but his mentalities — what ideas and attitudes he brought with him from Islamic North Africa and how these were shaped and changed by his time in European culture. The book elegantly suggests that while al-Wazzan’s journeys were
extraordinary, his complex, situational, and often ambiguous deployment of different identities was not.

The Mediterranean slave trade, while often overshadowed by human traffic in the early modern Atlantic, brought significant numbers of Christians and Muslims into contact with ethnic, religious, and racial difference. Scholars of medieval and early modern slavery in the Mediterranean are turning their attention from the economic implications of slavery to its role in emerging ideas of race, ethnicity, and status in the late medieval and early modern period. As the slave trade shifted during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from providing female domestic labour for households to providing male labour for galleys, European ideas about the connections between race and slavery also shifted, in large part because North African and Muslim corsair raids on European shipping and coastlines made it much more difficult to imagine slavery as something that did not happen to Europeans.

Mediterranean societies did not share one single definition of slavery, nor did they conform to a single model. The uniqueness of Mediterranean slaveries lies in their adaptability to the geopolitical, cultural and social changes of Mediterranean reality. The number of Christian European victims of Mediterranean corsairs from 1530 to 1780 is estimated to be between a million to a million-and-a-quarter. The estimate for Italy alone is between 400-000-500,000. Many slaves advanced their position. A few, especially in Muslim public sectors, rose high. This did not mean that they were less abused or suffered less from cruelty than slaves elsewhere. Cruelty, abuse, rape, sex harassment, and death were always prevalent, and although slaves did not suffer from them exclusively, their judicial status made them especially vulnerable and their subjugation especially extreme. In most cases a distinction – of “origin”, “ethnicity”, “faith or “colour” – was used to justify enslavement and subjugation. This was one of the ways in which the human mind dealt with the exploitation of its own kind, by not considering a slave as its own kind. But in spite of their distinction, slaves were part of Mediterranean societies thanks to their socio-economic function.

In economic typology, piracy was a redistributive enterprise, it produced no goods or services of its own but contributed to the economic system by delivering the goods and services produced by others. Trafficking in people was profitable, and the holding of crews and merchants for ransom is a specialized form of human trafficking. It was not terribly difficult to
halt a plump cargo ship, especially if the pirates attacked with several small vessels. The most distinctive elements of Mediterranean piracy was its ubiquity. It was not uncommon for piracy to be an occasional activity, with grain merchants turning their hand to maritime marauding during the growing season, or with spice merchants finishing off a successful trade mission with a quick side raid on a shipment of wine and silks. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries some of the most notorious of pirates sailed out of Malta, but the Barbary pirates sailing out of Tunis, Algeria and Morocco soon eclipsed them.

Religion mattered to pirates, though perhaps not so much as one might think. People who rob, enslave, and sometimes kill other people for a living, after all, are not likely to be fastidious about confessional matters. Religion factored into piratical calculus in either of two ways: first, when acting as a privateering force, pirates often sought out and engaged religious rivals as a matter of official policy – but even here religion was secondary to politics as a motivational element; second, religion played a direct role in the acquisition and sale of captives in Med slave markets. All the monotheistic cultures traditionally prohibited the enslavement of religious compatriots. Pirates in search of potential slaves therefore targeted members of other faiths, but what motivated them were market demands rather than religious scruples. Pirates could not sell Muslim slaves to Muslims purchasers, or Christian slaves to Christian purchasers, and so they paid attention to the religion of their captives as a simple matter of business. The decline of Mediterranean piracy coincided with the decline in Mediterranean slavery in the mid-to-late seventeenth century. While the early modern Mediterranean economy thrived, so did its pirate shadow; and when Europe’s economic supremacy passed to the Atlantic seaborne states in the seventeenth century, so too did the centre of piracy passing - with its close connection to slavery – to the Caribbean Sea.

Finally, the traditional Renaissance study of politics and diplomacy has been invigorated by the inclusion of Ottoman and Muslim perspectives. Some historians have applied the concept of a “Renaissance” to Muslim cultures, arguing that Western Europe was not the only society to be revitalized by attention to a classical past. They have also identified a body of political advice literature, written in the Middle East in the early sixteenth century, that treats issues of justice and legitimate rule. They have compared this Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literature to the “mirror for princes” literature being produced contemporaneously in Italy, most famously by Niccolo Machiavelli. They do not argue for a direct transmission of ideas between these texts; rather, they suggest that Italian and Islamic rulers’ comparable needs for texts that legitimated expanding states and centralizing bureaucracies led to comparable intellectual
It is tempting to try to reduce the history of the Mediterranean to a few common features, to attempt to define a "Mediterranean Identity" or to insist that certain physical features of the region have moulded human experience there. Yet this search for as fundamental unity starts from a misunderstanding of what the Med has meant for the peoples who have inhabited its shores and islands or have crossed its surface. Rather than searching for unity, we should note diversity. At the human level, this ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity was constantly subjected to external influences from across the sea, and therefore in a constant state of flux. The unity of Med history thus lies, paradoxically, in its swirling changeability, in the diasporas of merchants and exiles, in those who entered different societies across the sea, whether as traders, slaves, pirates or pilgrims, and so on, introducing something of the culture of one continent into the outer edges, at least, of another and whose presence could have a transforming effect on these different societies. The Med thus became probably the most vigorous place of interaction between different societies on the face of this planet, and it has played a role in the history of human civilization that has far surpassed any other expanse of sea.

Testi di riferimento:


Tutti questi testi riportano ampie bibliografie ragionate.