Naples, Sicily and the Levant in the first half of XIX century: an American view

Since 1783, the year which witness the peace between U.S.A. and England at the end of the Revolution, the ‘American factor’ appear on the Mediterranean theatre. Mostly after the signing of the treaty with Algiers in 1795, which promote the latter to the status of favoured partner and overseer of the American interests in the Mediterranean basin, the United States not only contribute to fasten the fall of the Barbary powers but also, during the first half of the XIX century, represent a particular presence both from the political-historical and the cultural point of view.\(^1\)

While the European powers seat in Vienna, on March 1815 the U.S.A. Congress authorizes the deployment of American naval forces in the Mediterranean right against Algiers. At the end of the second conflict against Barbary powers (after the first one that took place between 1801 and 1805, against Tripoli) the granting of the conclusion of the fees payment gives the U.S.A. navy full navigation rights in the basin and the Navy Department decides to create a permanent squadron against any further attack, basing it at Port Mahon, Minorca, until 1845.\(^2\)

Through the analysis of some travel memoires written either by American ‘civilians’, who were right on board of those U.S.A. frigates, or by simple travellers who, during the same period, sail the Inner Sea, following routes and itineraries that include the Italian peninsula and lead to the Ottoman Levant, is possible to focus on this presence which hasn’t still been properly assessed. Their attention doesn’t only emphasize palaces and cathedrals, crowns and diadems, castles and courtiers, nobles and princes, but also military and commercial powers, the Mediterranean people’s life conditions, what makes the difference between one nation, or one government, and another. These memories are related to the period 1825-1845, when in the Mediterranean in revolt a special match is played, though in the apparently closed ground of Restoration, after the crisis of the new European system, whose restlessness and effects also spread beyond the Atlantic Ocean.

Americans like George Jones, Enoch Cobb Wines, Valentine Mott, Francis Schroeder, and Nathaniel Parker Willis travel in a Mediterranean in arms, the centre of political Romanticism, where countries like Spain, Italy and Greece are proceeding toward the so-called ‘Latin democracies’, that is to say that particular

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character originated “dal costituzionalizzarsi dei rispettivi sistemi politici, nel farsi della nazione moderna, e dal successivo sviluppo delle istituzioni parlamentari, dei partiti e della lotta politica”\(^3\). That improvement, nevertheless, is for the Ottoman empire something that crashes with the ideas coming from the Western-European area of the Mediterranean basin, questioning tradition and indicating to the Arabic-Islamic world new and unpaved ideological and political ways. The attempt of getting a new style of ‘reformation’ of the Ottoman empire during this period blows away old institutions and replaces them with new ones imported from the West, though at the same time the Sublime Porte falls victim not only of the western imperialism but also of the nationalism amongst its subjects\(^4\).

With different itineraries and means, though all characterized by the curiosity of travelling in that part of the world so intensely seducing and captivating for “all who make a pilgrimage thither to mourn over the ruins of a land that was once adorned by the most powerful and polished nations that ever existed”\(^5\) and “where Genius wantoned in her young and vernal hour”\(^6\), these American travellers offer their observations and views of the complex Mediterranean reality, certainly beyond the stereotyped borders of the *Grand Tour*, in a mixture of sea and land, going from the coasts of Northern Africa, to the Holy Land and Asia Minor, “where the mixture of nations, languages and costumes has reached its acmé”\(^7\). There are different kinds of views and interpretative schemes; sometimes they follow each other, some others they match, while very often they diverge, floating amongst adventurous perspectives and practical aspects of life on board of vessels of war, on which it is observed with a certain surprise “the development of a system, so complicated, yet complete; a system presenting the singular spectacle of a thorough monarchy, sheltered under the wings of republicanism”\(^8\), either criticizing or appreciating men, places, usages and traditions, and the pleasure and pride of seeing the U.S.A. Navy building slowly but firmly a ‘real role’ for the nation abroad, watching the great powers’ moves in the Mediterranean and the typical following exaltation of their own country, so foretelling also the essential lines of a question that in time would grow more and more complex and contemporary.

The authors taken into consideration in this paper are peculiar characters, like Jones (Pennsylvania, 1800-1870), teacher of navigation art and science for the U.S. midshipmen of the war vessels he boards on and later an Episcopal minister; Wines (New Jersey, 1806-1879), former scholar and professor of ancient

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5 V. MOTT, *Travels in Europe and the East, 1834-41*, New York 1842, VII.

6 E. COBB WINES, *Two years and half in the Navy or journal of a cruise in the Mediterranean and Levant on board of the U.S. frigate Constitution in the years 1829, 1830 and 1831*, Philadelphia 1832, in two vols.; for the quotation see vol. I, VI.


8 See G. JONES, vol. I, III.
languages at the University of Washington and then secretary of the association of the New York prison and scholar in criminal law; Mott (New York, 1785-1865), professor of surgery at the Columbia University and among the founders of the Faculty of Medicine at the New York University; Parker Willis (Maine, 1806-1867), famous author, poet and editor, correspondent for the *New York Mirror*; and, at last, Schroeder, secretary of the U.S. squadron in the Mediterranean in 1843-45. The different and singular points of views spreading from the reading of these sources are the outcome not only of the different character of their authors, but also of the historical, political and social changes that take place in the Mediterranean area after the Congress of Vienna and before the Crimean War. They all draw an equal attention both to the dead and the alive, to the ancient monuments and the solemn temples and the inhabitants of the Old World, and not only and always to point out how often those observations of men’s art and skilfulness represent the ‘chronicles’ of human sufferings, of the triumphs of monarchical powers too grown and of the kingdom of black superstitions, so distant from the American political structure, the result “of two hundred years of sleepless toil, of patient investigation, and bloody struggles, in the discussion and defence of human rights, through the long and dark night of colonial servitude, till the sacred principles of civil and religious liberty, which our early forefathers planted upon these then wild and inhospitable shores, were consummated to ripe maturity under the bright dawn, and through the matchless heroism, of our immortal Revolution”\(^\text{11}\). There was clearly also the endeavour to correct the idea based on the reading of other previous travellers’ writings, together with a positive view of the ‘other’, that tries to leave aside that stereotyped outlook and that distorted image of the Mediterranean and Levantine world, seen by the collective imagery as a place that, right thanks to its antiquities, warns about temporary human glory and where the most blameable extremes of poverty and opulence seem to be the only two main characters of social existence.

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\(^{11}\) See V. MOTT, XIII.