
THE MEDITERRANEAN IN HISTORY*

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SUCH a vast subject can, in my opinion, be tackled in only one manner if one is to avoid indefinite generalizations: one has to focus on certain primary aspects of Mediterranean history, analysing their characteristics, and explying them with facts which are, as much as possible, new and which may serve to describe them. From their totality should emerge an overview, certainly not complete but hopefully indicative, of the great trends of history, which are inevitably determined by men and the environment. I will therefore divide my paper in three sections: prehistory, ancient history, and medieval and modern history. For each I shall seek to set down the major characteristics and also the essential links between them.

Prehistory

The first clearly perceptible encounter among the civilizations along the Mediterranean coast occurred far back in prehistory, about eight thousand years before the birth of Christ. It was from western Europe in fact, and more specifically from the Iberian peninsula, that the great cave art, with its etchings and drawings, gradually crossed over to northern Africa, according to the most prevalent modern interpretations. It is a naturalistic art which was discovered by the Italian Fabrizio Mori in Adart Acacus and which Louis-René Nougier has recently confirmed in Terrarat where grandiose panels with engraved buffaloes and cattle reach the highest pinnacles of art. In Tassili, on the other hand, the Saharan world provides us with the peculiar representations of the 'round heads' side by side with hunting scenes. Finally, at Giabberen and at Sefar, the huge figures that evidently represent divine beings demonstrate the extraordinary flowering of an art which, to repeat myself, draws its inspiration directly from the south of France and, above all, from Spain.

Also during prehistory another great Mediterranean phenomenon renews, a millennium or so later, the links between different regions. Roughly from 4,000 to 2,000 BC there flourished, especially in the greater

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islands, the 'megalithic' civilization which is characterized by constructions of temples and tombs fashioned out of large stone blocks, the transportation of which was certainly an exceptional technical achievement. At the same time, such civilizations are also characterized by imposing human images, also carved out in a primitive way of huge stone blocks sometimes made with simple incisions on boulders or on steles. In the temples and the female statues of Malta, in the *nuraghi* of Sardinia, in the towers and the stele statues of Corsica one can see the best examples of this phenomenon.

The megalithic civilization is, therefore, a characteristic of the Mediterranean world between the fourth and third millenniums before Christ. As far as the area of its origin is concerned, up to some time ago it used to be placed in the Near East and more precisely Egypt, where similar achievements had been carried out by the pyramid-builders. It is today held that other megalithic constructions outside the Mediterranean region, like those on the northern coast of France and in the British Isles, of which Stonehenge is the most famous manifestation, are, according to radiocarbon dating, actually older in time.

However, whatever their links with the outside, the Mediterranean islands represent in late prehistory a characteristic and organic civilization the diffusion of which on the mainland is intriguing to analyse. Two recent discoveries here should be brought to attention: on one hand, the monumental tombs and the stele statues of the Val d'Aosta which show the penetration of the megalithic culture, through Liguria, to the foothills of the Alps; on the other, the stele statues of Lunigiana, a unique and rich collection which, to a small extent, can be admired in the museum at La Spezia and to a much larger extent in the appositely-constructed museum at Pontremoli. The megalithic phenomenon, therefore, which is typically insular and Mediterranean, gradually became a continental and European one. That, at east, is the direction of history as it manifests itself to us and how it can be confirmed with sufficient certainty in the sub-alpine region of Piedmont and in the sub-coastal one of Lunigiana.

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During the second millennium BC, when the megalithic civilizations were already in decline or at least when, for various reasons, they were not renewing themselves, there occurs the first clear instance of a movement of peoples from the East to the West.

These people, the Myceneans, emerge from a number of recent archaeological discoveries that prove their presence, between the seventeenth and twelfth centuries BC, along the coast of the Mediterranean, in particular the

Italian shores. There is no region in central and southern Italy and in the islands of Sicily and Sardinia that does not have its characteristic pottery, with its geometric figures or animals, that serves to identify Mycenaean presence. Of special relevance, amongst the latest discoveries, are those of Sarroch in Sardinia and on the island of Vivaro, while the Aeolian islands remain the datum point of the trade in obsidian, that lavic stone from which, during the Stone Age, tools could be fashioned which were both easier to make and more efficient than those made out of stone.

Quite rare, in spite of the attestation of the Mycenaean presence, is the evidence of fixed settlements. Those seafarers mostly 'brushed', so to say, the Italian shores and made a beachhead for as long as was necessary to exchange goods before sailing on. We are not, therefore, faced with a colonizing phenomenon; rather, with reference to the Greeks who will take up again some centuries later the routes opened by the Mycenaeans with a real colonizing intent, we should speak of pre-colonizing. Yet this phenomenon is no less exceptional, especially if one keeps in mind the primitive methods of navigation of those times; nor, for all this, is it less indicative of a Mediterranean unity which it rather typifies by the network of trade routes from one port to another and which remain unchanged in Mediterranean life and civilization.

Ancient History

During the eighth century BC the Greeks, the successors of the Mycenaeans, introduce the historical era along the shores of the Mediterranean, in particular through the development of the alphabet. Certainly the Greeks played their part but they were neither the sole nor the first agents of this spread, because the alphabet was invented by the Phoenicians and they were the ones to bring it westwards with a process that resembled that of the Mycenaeans and which was initially one of precolonization since it completely lacked the urge of conquest. It was the Carthaginians, the successors of the Phoenicians, who carried out the conquest. And so there occurs in the early history of the Mediterranean a sort of parallel that bears examination. Two great movements of maritime expansion, basically, come from the East: the Mycenaean, which later became the Greek one, and that of the Phoenicians which was later taken up by the Carthaginians. The two movements mostly follow different routes (but not all the time for there were significant overlaps). The Mycenaeans and the Greeks follow a northern route which passes through the Aegean islands and reaches Apulia from where it spreads into mainland Italy on one side and into Sicily on the other. The Phoenicians and the Carthaginians follow a southern route along

the North African coast up to Spain but deviating near Carthage towards Sicily, Sardinia, and the Balearic islands. In Sicily, therefore, it links with the Greek route.

Both these manifestations feature prominently in the history of the Mediterranean; they are indeed leading protagonists. But it is necessary to analyse deeply their relationship. As far as is known the Myceneans preceded the Phoenicians in the precolonization of our sea, though the Phoenicians, who founded Carthage in 814 BC, predate, though not by much, the Greeks who founded Ischia in 775 BC. They preceded them even in the expansion of trade without intent of conquest. The first real conquerors were the Greeks who arrived in the West starved of land that could be cultivated and therefore, to use a modern term with all due care, it was with them that 'colonialism' was born in the Mediterranean.

In the face of the Greek threat, the Phoenicians and their successors the Carthaginians adapted themselves, transforming their first settlements into fortified positions to control the sea-routes. But they did it, as it seems, not spontaneously but more as a reaction to other events. In times much more close to ours, one can recall the case of Britain, again with all due reservations. Britain transformed the commercial nature of its colonialism into an imperialistic one when the other powers (France and Germany) entered as competitors. All this does not gainsay, to return to the ancient world, that, from the eighth century BC, the history of the Mediterranean becomes one of opposing imperialistic forces with the Carthaginians on one side and the Greeks, and later the Romans, on the other. Evidence of this phase of history can be obtained from the archaeological campaigns I have conducted in the last two decades, some of which I would like to mention as a concrete contribution to our argument. I shall mention therefore that in Tunisia near Cape Bon we have identified the fortresses built by Carthage for purposes of offense and defence in the war against the Greeks in the Sicilian Channel, while in Algeria we have identified, along the banks of the river Seybouse, a chain of fortresses stretching inwards from the sea and which evidently marked the limits of the westward expansion of the Carthaginian empire.

However, the discoveries of major interest, both as regards amplitude and as regards variety, are those of Sardinia where for the first time a Carthaginian settlement built inland rather than on the coast was identified. This was the fortress of Mount Sirai, near Carbonia, from where we have extended our campaigns to other fortresses, until it was demonstrated that in the fourth century BC, on the eve of the Punic Wars, Carthage was substantially in control of the entire island.

One particular fact is of relevance to the present subject: the manifestation of the imminent danger that Carthage presented for Rome and which clearly explains the origin of the Punic Wars.

After all, Carthage had earlier directly involved herself in the Tyrrhennian Sea: proof of this lies in the discovery at Pyrgi (now called Santa Severa) of three gold laminae with Etruscan and Punic inscriptions, datable to around 500 BC, written by Thefarie Velianas, King of Cerveteri, obviously as a treaty. These laminae may quite legitimately be considered as a symbol of intense and fruitful contacts between peoples and cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world.

The Roman conquests and the creation of an empire that stretched to all the shores of what is already referred to as *mare nostrum* unifies the Mediterranean world at the beginning of the Christian era. It was the political moment of the greatest and most complete unity: it had never occurred before and it would never occur again. Among the discoveries that throw light upon the Mediterranean vocation of Rome, I would like to cite at least the gradual resurgence, through the systematic excavations that are taking place, of the great cities of Luni and Aquileia. Both looking out towards the sea and both hubs of considerable sea trade, the cities, so to say, prefigured the roles of Genoa and Venice respectively, and mark a northward shift, or better a new equilibrium, of the traditional southward movement of our history.

Even with respect to the Roman Mediterranean, some indicative information can be obtained from our campaigns. At Ramat Rahel, near Jerusalem, we have unearthed a citadel of the local kings, but on these ruins we found the easily-identifiable remains of the settlement of the tenth Roman legion, witnessed by the stamped bricks, the pipes of the baths, and the mosaic pavements. In Tunisia we identified some Roman settlements that were built over Carthaginian ones. Finally, in Malta, there is a significant overlaying of religious structures: on the prehistoric sanctuary at Marsaxlokk there was built a Punic one and on the latter, as the inscriptions bear unequivocal witness, arose the temple of Juno described by Cicero in the orations against Verres.

The Christian phase of Mediterranean history is directly connected with the Roman one. And the common denominator is still evident because Christianity largely spread along its shores and used the Roman road network to affirm itself. A number of recent discoveries throw particular light as to how the African element of Christianity made inroads into Italy: I can refer to the catacombs of St Gennaro at Capodimonte where the mosaic portraits of the ancient bishops of Naples have been discovered; among

these bishops, the most important is Quodvultdeus, who must have come from Africa as can undoubtedly be seen in the extant evidence and even in the somatic features.

Finally, I have to mention another recent discovery, datable to the end of the ancient era and the eve of the Middle Ages, which is both indicative and full of significance for the profitable encounters of civilization that occur in this region. The villa in Piazza Armerina in Sicily, with its splendid mosaics, is very well known. But this was not the only such villa for others, no less splendid, have emerged at Tellaro near Syracuse and at Patti near Milazzo. The elaborate figures on the mosaic, datable between the fourth and fifth centuries AD clearly indicate the African origin of the artists who founded a flourishing school beyond their native shores and who, to meet the demands of the owners of the villas, also came to Sicily.

Medieval and Modern History

The invasion of the barbarians, who from the fifth century AD laid waste the formerly fertile lands of the Roman Empire, introduced a new dimension in history: that of Central Europe from where the barbarians came and towards which they were drawn. Today we know more than ever about this event, thanks to the archaeological excavations that have unearthed the monuments and the funerary objects of the Lombards: I am referring in particular to the tombs of the warriors that have been found at Trezzo on the river Adda. But, whatever the discoveries, this era marks the recession of the Mediterranean dimension, the emergence and the prevalence of a Central European dimension which favours the northern regions of Italy and, for the first time in history, emarginates the southern ones. It emarginates both the southern regions of Italy and the Mediterranean: a typical example is provided by the coastal city of Paestum which, laid waste by malaria and by pirates, is abandoned by its inhabitants who retire to the inland hill of Capaccio where they build a church and a new settlement, which has also been excavated.

The reaction to this different dimension of history, which casts the Mediterranean into the shadow, comes from an expansionist and conquering movement that drifts from east towards the west, once again along the African routes. This phenomenon of the seventh century AD re-echoes that of the Phoenician of the eighth century BC so that, one thousand and five hundred years later, it almost brings about a recurrence of history, different in many aspects but similar in many others. I am referring to the Arab conquests.

Comparing the Arabic and Islamic expansion to the Phoenician and

Carthaginian one, we encounter a phenomenon that is different and yet on several counts similar. It is different because it takes place right in the Middle Ages rather than at the beginning of the ancient era, because it makes its way through the desert rather than through the coastal cities; because, right from the start, it is a military venture rather than a commercial enterprise. Yet the similarities are more forceful: the Arab conquest, like the Phoenician expansion, originates from the Arabian peninsula and its adjacent regions; its protagonists are people who spoke Semitic languages and had strict cultural affinities; it follows the same route along the North African coast and finds the same outlet on the coasts of Sicily and of Spain.

In recent years the Italian school of Arab studies has cast new light on the influence of the Arabs on Italian and European culture. Keeping in mind the outcome, I would like at least to refer to its artistic achievement which has a particular incidence in our view of the Mediterranean.

The intrusion of Islamic architectural elements in the monumental buildings of south and central Italy is undeniable; and even as regards movable objects the diffusion was quite considerable, without prejudice to the possibility that they could have originated not from the territories occupied by the Arabs in Italy but rather from other Islamic countries with which Italy came into contact for reasons of Mediterranean trade.

The Palatine Chapel at Palermo provides a symbolic example. The division of the ceiling into panels has made possible the placing of hundreds of figures and small autonomous scenes which all have the diversions of the prince as their common theme. The frontal depiction and the absence of perspective, the tendency for symmetry and for heraldic arrangement, the rich bestiary, and the fantastical figures undoubtedly have their roots in some fundamental characteristics of the art of the Near East, which had even served as inspiration to the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, and yet, at the same time, they transcend them by the freedom and the wealth of a reality which is not unique, as has been demonstrated by the recent discovery of another picture cycle in the cathedral of Cefalù.

The ceramics, the ivories, the glass, the woods, the textiles, the bronzes in which the decorative elements of animal imagery and of calligraphy predominate, document the wealth of the so-called 'minor arts' which link a considerable number of artistic works in our museums from Amalfi to Venice to the world of the Arabs. Nor is it a coincidence that these are from mostly Mediterranean maritime cities, particularly well-disposed to trade with the opposite African and Asian shores. Nor does the discussion of art exhaust all the themes; it is enough to think about the intrusion of Arabic elements into our language, from scientific to dialectical terms, and above

all to the Arab literary sources, so expertly pointed out by Enrico Cerulli, and which inspire the narrative of the Divine Comedy.

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The year AD 1300 which marks the annihilation of the Arabs in Italy introduces a deep change in the general vision of history for the European dimension returns to dominate, this time in a more lasting manner, in Mediterranean affairs. The Crusades no doubt played a determining role for they developed a solidarity among the nations of Europe based on a common, anti-Arab and anti-Islamic religious ideal.

A chronicler of the First Crusade, Fulcherius, writes: 'If a Briton or a German wanted to speak to me I was not able to speak back to either one or the other. However, in spite of the great difference of language that separated us, it seemed that we had become one people through the love of God and the charity towards our neighbour.' However much one strips this testimony of the ideals declared in it and for all the internal rivalries among the Crusaders that one may wish to recall, the common conditions of life, in the supernational initiative of which they are the expression, constitute nevertheless a powerful stimulus to get to know one another for mutual comprehension and, above all, in our case, for the total confrontation with the Islamic world and for the changing the other way round of the political and military initiative. From this moment onwards, the gravitation towards Europe in history starts to predominate. Two great events contribute to this state of affairs, two events the effects of which were to be quite long-lasting.

The first event was the discovery of America which in 1492, just when the last Arab bulwark in Spain fell, provided new outlets for Europe, reducing the Mediterranean to a marginal area or at least an area that was not central any more.

The second event was the setting up of the Ottoman caliphate which extended its power over all the North African states and practically isolated them from Mediterranean affairs, in which they now made only sporadic appearances: practically only through their piratical raids. As for the Colonial Age, from the late eighteenth century onwards, it will accentuate the divide between Europe and the opposite Afro-Asiatic shores, creating in the latter feelings of lastin hostility and resentment that survive till the present day, even though colonialism has been done away with for quite some time. All this does not gainsay the fact that, at least in the first phase of the period after the Crusades, an intensive exchange continued on many levels. To illustrate this it is enough to say that the most admirable and the most lasting scientific and cultural inquiry on the world which we have

been discussing is undoubtedly that which Fernand Braudel entitled 'Civilizations and Empires in the Mediterranean in the age of Philip II', that is in the second half of the sixteenth century. But even Braudel admits that subsequently the Mediterranean moves out of the great history; and in this same epoch which he has so masterfully analysed, a fact becomes evident: the predominance of North over South, of Europe over Asia and Africa, both of which, now, start sliding towards emargination.

This emargination undoubtedly comes to an end with the Second World War. Therefore, even if our gravitation towards Europe is an irreversible fact, the necessity for a Mediterranean policy and interchange starts to make itself felt once again, mostly in Italy, with respect to the opposite coast where the Arab countries have succeeded to achieve a lasting and autonomous national order.

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