

The Mediterranean. A View from the East

Daniela Dueck
(scientific editor)

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Pza. San Diego, s/n - 28801 Alcalá de Henares (Madrid)
Tlfs.: +34 91 885 40 66/+34 91 885 41 06
Correo electrónico: serv.publicaciones@uah.es
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PREFACE.

THE MEDITERRANEAN: A VIEW FROM THE EAST

In the *Phaedo*, Plato famously describes human inhabitants dwelling around the Mediterranean as “ants or frogs around a pond” (ὡσπερ περὶ τέλμα μύρμηκας ἢ βατράχους)¹. Plato’s image is a good starting point for this volume. For a frog, the view of a pond is essentially constant. The human gaze, of course, involves so much more. Cultural and geographic factors powerfully shape experiences and thus have a decisive impact on how humans describe their world.

Throughout history, the Mediterranean Sea has played a significant role in the culture of its surrounding countries. In antiquity, this role reflected views taken from particular cultural and geographical standpoints. Due to issues of textual availability, scholars studying the ancient Mediterranean have tended to focus on classical texts, which take mainly Greek and Roman perspectives, and specifically views expressed by authors who were active in mainland Greece or in Italy.

Recently, however, the study of the Mediterranean as viewed from the East has come into its own. In November 2022, an international conference devoted to it took place in Jerusalem, in a land situated on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. Participants were thus in the unique position of discussing views of the Mediterranean from this vantage.

The term “view” is polysemic, denoting, for example, the visual perception of an object or an attitude. Thus, a “view of the Mediterranean” may be taken as what the observer sees in relation to the sea, or what he thinks of when he sees the sea. When discussing eastern views of the Mediterranean, it may be useful to examine sources written by authors who lived in the East or in places other than mainland Greece or the Roman Urbs, the center of the Roman Empire. More fundamentally, in exploring the mental concept of the Mediterranean, we might consider ideas influenced by authors’ cultural milieux as well as by eastern cultures and geographical environments.

¹ PL., *Phdr.* 109a-b.

The issue of perspective is closely related to the concept of center vs. periphery. In the Roman Empire, but also among the Greeks, there was a notion of a central region or city, whose effective communication systems and high population density stimulated prosperity, both economic and intellectual. These were contrasted with the peripheral and remote regions, which were characterized by poor communication networks and sparse populations, and hence enjoyed less lively intellectual activity. This is another element in the orientation of the conference papers that comprise the present volume: expansion of the traditional scope of inquiry to include peripheral views.

Hellenistic writers were active all around the Mediterranean, including its eastern parts. The question arises as to whether there was a particular tendency or view —historiographic or geographic— in the writings of scholars residing on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. This question emerges from the more general one concerning the extent to which place of origin or activity of an author influences his/her intellectual profile and scholarly choices.

An early example of an eastern view of the Mediterranean appears in the Bible. In numerous biblical examples, the Sea (*Yam*), that is, the Mediterranean, is synonymous with ‘West’². Such an identification derives from the physical locus of the culture which produced this terminology. In other words, this is how the Mediterranean was viewed from the East. Another biblical term for the Mediterranean reflects an orientation based on spatial layout of the eastern land. A person facing the sunrise is conceived of as facing frontwards, *Kedem*, which becomes synonymous with East. Thus, the Dead Sea is referred to as “the eastern/frontal sea” (*HaYam HaKadmoni*)³. The Mediterranean, then, in relation to the Dead Sea, is referred to as “the rear sea” (*HaYam HaAharon*)⁴. Such terminology could only arise from an eastern point in the Land of Israel.

The Mediterranean’s presence in the life of those residing on its shores, that is, of the “ants and frogs”, was self-evident and natural. The sea was the everyday visual background for the people surrounding it. For them, it was the constant scenic backdrop. It was also a means of transportation. These two features —landscape and sea routes— appear in the following brief textual examples. Both excerpts are taken from letters, one a view from the north of the Mediterranean, the other a view from the east.

² For instance, in *Gen.* 13.14; *Num.* 2.18; *Deut.* 3.27 and many more.

³ *Ezech.* 47.18; *Zach.* 14.8; *Joel* 2.8.

⁴ *Deut.* 11.24; 34.2.

In the first letter, Pliny the Younger (b. first century CE) is telling his friend, Gallus, about his glorious coastal estate outside Rome, where the presence of the sea is palpable:

Facing the middle of the cloisters is a cheerful inner court, then comes a dining-room running down towards the shore, which is handsome enough for anyone, and when the sea is disturbed by the south-west wind the room is just flecked by the spray of the spent waves ... On the other side of the building there is a nicely decorated chamber, then another room which would serve as either a large bedchamber or a moderate-sized dining room, as it enjoys plenty of sunshine and an extensive sea-view⁵.

This simple letter offers a visual image of a Mediterranean mansion. The coastal atmosphere is grasped by the senses as part of a regular, ordinary, pleasant way of life.

The second letter was written in the fifth century CE by Aeneas of Gaza, a Neo-Platonist philosopher who converted to Christianity and was part of the rhetorical school of Gaza, on the eastern Mediterranean shore. He wrote this to a friend:

I know well that you sailed and arrived in peace: for you did not come to rob a ship like the most powerful of the ancients, nor to trade like many of the living today, but out of desire for beloved people and places, so that it is right to say that Philius (Zeus as the god of friendship) sailed with you. I hope that the polis will also be as sympathetic to you as the sea, and that you will receive from your friends such love as is directed towards friends who return home⁶.

The Mediterranean in the Aeneas' letter is primarily a means of transportation for purposes of visitation —as well as trade and theft. But the sea is also portrayed as potentially hostile or friendly. This is a powerful image in which the sea is both constant and diverse, being a significant element in the lives of the inhabitants surrounding its shores.

Do the letters of Pliny and Aeneas indicate distinct attitudes towards the sea? In both excerpts, the Mediterranean is a generic landscape view —any similar body of water could have served the same purpose. Taking a different direct, the articles gathered in this volume approach the term “view” as a concept that stems from a specific geographical vantage point.

⁵ *epist.* 2.17. Translated by John B. Firth.

⁶ *AEN.GAZ., Ep.* 8. My translation.

In this regard, let us now briefly turn to another view of the Mediterranean from the East, this time the Asian East. The quotation below dates to the Han-Wei dynasty (c. fourth century CE) and is taken from the volume *China and the Ancient Mediterranean World*⁷:

Tiaozhi (Syria) is at a distance of several thousand *li*⁸ west of Anxi (Persian Empire). The state is situated on the Western Sea; it is warm and damp. The fields are worked and sown with rice, there are large birds⁹, and birds' eggs as [large as water] jars. The population is very numerous, and, in many places, there are minor overlords or chiefs ... The state of Da Qin (the Roman Empire) ... lies to the west of the great sea which is west of Anxi and Tiaozhi. From the town of Angu (Antiochia) on the frontier of Anxi, one travels by boat directly across to the west of the sea. If one meets with favorable winds, it takes two months, but with delaying winds, it takes perhaps one year, and with no wind at all, perhaps three years. As this state lies west of the sea, it is popularly called "West of Sea". There is a river (the Tiber?) which comes out from this state. To the west, there is also a great sea¹⁰.

This excerpt demonstrates a style similar to the Greek genre of *periploi*: it includes distances, toponyms, directions, and topographic information. Yu Tais-han in the above-mentioned volume clarifies that the term "Western Sea" in the Chinese historical books of that period could refer to one of several bodies of water: the Qing Sea, the Aral Sea, the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. However, in this quoted passage the context clearly alludes to the Mediterranean, which may be added to the list of western seas. In a view from the Chinese East, the Mediterranean is depicted as western, similarly to the biblical concept.

Stemming from this fulcrum of "the Mediterranean — a view from the East", the various articles in this volume discuss different aspects of this thematic definition. However, as the range of topics is diverse, a brief overview of their content and their link to the main issue is due.

Our volume begins with three panoramic articles, each focusing on specific aspects in the history of the Mediterranean and emphasizing the eastern point of view. Encarnación Castro-Páez offers in the first article a synthesis of literary sources to reconstruct the perception of the eastern territories of the Mediterranean. Her survey starts with the Persian Wars which resulted in replacement of

¹⁷ TAISHAN, Yu, *China and the Ancient Mediterranean World: A Survey of Ancient Chinese Sources. Sino-Platonic Papers* 242, Philadelphia, 2013.

¹⁸ *Li* is the Chinese mile, about 500 m.

¹⁹ Probably ostriches.

¹⁰ TAISHAN 2013, pp. 6, 30.

the Aegean Sea by the Mediterranean, within both the geo-political and the intellectual spheres. This study ends with the Treaty of Apamea, a peace that summarizes the already unstoppable interference of Rome in the Hellenistic kingdoms and reflects on the political and conceptual changes in the eastern Mediterranean.

The second article by Manuel Albaladejo Vivero draws on various first century CE geographical works and authors —the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Pomponius Mela, Pliny the Elder— to discuss ports in western and southern Arabia. The author suggests that the capitals of the kingdoms in these areas retained strict control over main ports, so that their rulers could regulate long-distance trade including taxes, tariffs, and port fees. These commercial routines involved networking the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea based on the Roman expansion after the conquest of Egypt. The connection between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea region through Alexandria, the Nile Valley and the Egyptian eastern desert routes reflects another aspect of the Mediterranean as viewed from the East.

The third wide-ranging article is Roberto Nicolai's discussion of the Pelasgians and their migrations. The analysis of ancient traditions concerning the Pelasgians better defines how the Greeks conceived movements of peoples in the ancient Mediterranean. At the same time, it brings into focus key themes such as autochthony, ethnic identity, and linguistic diversities. Thus, it is an important chapter in the history of the Mediterranean and its eastern regions.

Following the three panoramic surveys, our collection of articles proceeds to specific studies of various aspects of this volume's theme. Introducing the Hellenistic view from the East, Francisco Javier Gómez Espelosín sets out to discuss Alexander in the eastern regions of the Mediterranean. Modern research usually views the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire from a western perspective because of its reliance on Greek sources. However, the literary and ideological devices in these accounts distort the interpretation of the events and the significance of the campaign for its main protagonist. Only by looking at this historical chapter from a distinct perspective —from the East— and by integrating the facts within this eastern context can we achieve better understandings.

Still in the Hellenistic atmosphere, Francisco Javier González Mora offers a study of the fragments of Timagetus the periplographer. What we know about him is only that he was the author of a geographic work entitled *The Ports* or *On Ports*, in at least two books, of which only seven quotations survived. When the coasts of the western Mediterranean are described from an eastern point of view (i.e., from the point of view of the Greeks and the peoples in their environment), serious geographical "mistakes" occur due to the lack of concrete

knowledge of such distant areas. Analysing this kind of data is of crucial importance for the dating of Timagetus' *periplus* but it also shows once again how the Mediterranean is viewed from the East.

The next study by Serena Bianchetti discusses the eastern Mediterranean islands as described in Diodorus of Sicily's book 5 of the *Bibliothēke*. Diodorus chooses these islands to propose a model of the development of human history. In this model we find the combination of a succession of catastrophic events (floods, desertification, earthquakes) and human interventions on the part of men who worked for the well-being of humanity and were in fact responsible for improvements in the most ancient conditions of life (distribution of land, enactment of laws, first forms of city aggregations). This interpretative form is absent in descriptions of islands in other parts of the inhabited world. Thus, the climatic phenomena identified in the selected geographical area i.e. the eastern Mediterranean, constitute, in Diodorus' perspective, a kind of historical rupture, necessary to legitimate subsequent human interventions.

Giusto Traina takes us on a Mediterranean journey following Tiridates I who travelled to Rome for his crowning by Nero in 66 CE. Records of this journey include contradictions. However, it seems that the long and costly journey to Italy was based on religious grounds since Tiridates was a *magus*. This status also explains why, once awarded the diadem, the king was able to cross the Ionian Sea and was not forced to return by land.

The next article takes the viewpoint of an eastern author educated on Classical traditions — Josephus Flavius. José M. Candau Morón sets out to determine to what extent the conventions of Greek historiography influenced Josephus' works. The author compares the accounts of Herod in Josephus' *Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities* to clarify whether each account depends on different Greek historiographical traditions. Josephus seems to expand the generic boundaries of Greek historiography by introducing into his historical work concepts and causal patterns alien to the Greco-Roman mentality.

Still in the East, José Rafael Reyes González proposes to study the *Acts of the Apostles* from a hodological perspective. It was Luke who wrote this work in the first quarter of the second century CE in the eastern Roman Empire and narrated the travels of Paul of Tarsus. Behind these journeys it is possible to discern Luke's heterogeneous spatial concept. Jerusalem is its central and starting point and Rome is its destination. Thus, Luke reflects a particular view of the Mediterranean through the eyes of Paul of Tarsus.

Fátima Aguayo Hidalgo discusses in the next article the trial of Jesus facing Pontius Pilate. She examines what role the Roman governor played in the judgement of Jesus and tries to determine whether he was responsible for this

act. The aim is to understand the Pilate's actions and to explore possible motivations and pressures that influenced his decision. The testimony of Josephus, one of the few authors who speak of Pilate as a historical rather than a biblical figure, is fundamental to this discussion.

Leaving the Hellenistic era and the period of the Roman principate, the volume finally expands its chronological and geographical borders to end up with two articles related to the Byzantine period. Juan Signes Codoñer tries to prove that the concept of national homeland, that is, the identification of a nation with a specific territory, was alien to the identity feeling of the Byzantines during the millenary existence of their Empire, which had a significant role in the history of the Eastern Mediterranean during the Middle Ages. The article explores also the function of Greek as vehicular and cultural language in Byzantium.

The last article, by Inmaculada Pérez Martín, considers how the Byzantines oriented themselves in space. The Byzantines lacked a word for the concept of orientation of oneself in space, although it was common to indicate the orientation of an object relative to the cardinal points. The author analyses illustrations preserved in Greek manuscripts of Strabo and Cosmas Indicopleustes, which are oriented both south and north and discusses the notions of left, right and centre, with their political and religious connotations, and their identifications with directions. Through other sources Pérez Martín delves into the concept of the centrality of Constantinople and offers examples of hybrid descriptions of territories, combining one- and two-dimensional perspectives. This last contribution has to do with the subject of the book in a tangential way, since it does not offer a look at the Mediterranean from the East but studies what the East meant for the Mediterranean civilization of the Byzantines.

It is then through these twelve articles, varying in scope and in detail, that several aspects of the Mediterranean as viewed from the East are revealed. These aspects rely mainly on historical changes and processes occurring in the eastern regions of the Mediterranean and on historical persons and authors active in the East. Throughout issues of geography and ethnography serve as thematic guidelines.

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Trabajos de:

DANIELA DUECK

ENCARNACIÓN CASTRO-PÁEZ

MANUEL ALBALADEJO VIVERO

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Throughout history, the Mediterranean Sea has been viewed primarily through Greek and Roman authors reflecting perspectives from the center or western parts of the Sea, but what stories emerge when we look at this ancient crossroads from the East? This groundbreaking collection of essays, inspired by a 2022 Jerusalem conference, challenges traditional narratives by exploring the Mediterranean world through an eastern lens.

From the shores of the Levant to the bustling ports of Asia Minor, twelve diverse articles investigate how location and cultural context shaped ancient writers' perceptions of this vital waterway. The volume opens with three panoramic surveys that set the stage for detailed explorations of geography, ethnography, and historical developments in the eastern Mediterranean.

By examining the works of Hellenistic writers active in the East and questioning the traditional center-periphery dynamic of the Roman world, this collection offers fresh insights into how ancient scholars and societies understood and experienced the Mediterranean. It presents a fascinating counterpoint to the conventional Greco-Roman narrative, revealing a sea of many voices and perspectives.



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