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Global insights into encounters at sea

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ENCOUNTERS AT SEA

An intellectual journey through
the collections of the
Riccardiana Library in Florence

Giovanni Tarantino
Giorgio Riello
José María Pérez Fernández

*With an afterword
by Cátia Antunes*

PAPER, OBJECTS
AND SENTIMENTS
IN MOTION
ACROSS THE
MEDITERRANEAN





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<i>Cátia Antunes</i>	

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AFTERWORD

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Global Insights into *Encounters at Sea*

‘People in Motion: Entangled Histories of Displacement across the Mediterranean (1492–1923)’,¹ or COST Action PIMo, held its first (of four) major conferences in Florence, Italy, in February 2020. The results of this conference – framed, hosted and curated by the Riccardiana Library, working with PIMo members – served as the basis for the magnificent ‘Encounters at Sea: People, Paper and Objects in Motion’ exhibition of material culture and for broad-ranging discussions regarding the nature of mobility in the Mediterranean for people, objects, paper and ideas. The outputs of the exhibition and some of these discussions have now been transposed into this multi-disciplinary volume of scholarship.

Encounters at Sea was inspired by the idea of the Mediterranean as envisaged by Fernand Braudel in his seminal work *La Méditerranée*, which was first published in France in 1949 and marked the start of a new era in historical studies across Europe and, somewhat later, in the United States.² Contrary to Braudel’s opus magnum, which was the product of his memory while imprisoned during the Second World War, Encounters at Sea does not result from the imagination and inherent knowledge of its convenors, but is instead a fundamentally archive-guided and researched piece of scholarship. It departs from a selection of the many treasures held at the Riccardiana and which speak to memory, transmission, representation, transposition and apprehension of and in a Mediterranean as seen within its connections and entanglements with the broader world. Like Braudel, however, the exhibition curators and the authors of the three essays opening this concomitant volume portray a Mediterranean where encounters and dis-encounters, mobility and immobility, and placement and displacement, seem to affect human beings and their imagination just as much as the objects they created and recreated to mark such events. These objects include maps, illustrations, travel diaries, travelogues and cabinets of curiosities that share and convene the idea of a Mediterranean embedded in a global world at different moments in history.

While this exhibition and the concomitant discussions about individuals and imagery seem to have been inspired by Braudel’s proposition of what the Mediterranean

opposite page
MS Ricc. 2669, Filippo
Calandri, *Trattato d’abaco*, late
15th c., fol. 104r.

¹ This project was originally developed by Giovanni Tarantino (University of Florence) and Katrina O’Loughlin (Brunel University, London).

² Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1949); John A. Marino, ‘The Exile and His Kingdom: The Reception of Braudel’s Mediterranean’, *The Journal of Modern History* 76 (2004): 622–52.

3 David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

4 Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

world entailed, the paths the exhibition follows differ somewhat from his primordial analysis of a world framed by structures, conjunctures and events specific to the societal environment that developed along the shores of the Mediterranean. Rather, the analytical framework and intersectional theoretical perception of the Riccardiana materials reflect David Abulafia's premise that the Mediterranean is primarily a body of water, articulated by islands, that is open, naturally or artificially, to other bodies of water and, as such, part – if not centrally, at least primordially – of a globalized world.³

The sea itself stands central in the sections relating to 'Cartography', 'Navigation Culture', 'Trade' and 'A Turkish Pound', as well as in some of the 'Travel diaries and travelogues' and in 'Seafaring'. What they all have in common is a threefold reflection of the Mediterranean as a body of water. In the first place, they portray a reality as perceived by their authors, contextualized in this volume in their time and their mental and cultural spaces. Secondly, the sea is mirrored as an individual and collective experience rooted as much on knowledge as on imagination of what a body of water should encase. Lastly, these commentaries transpose different epochs' perceptions of the sea's function into people's cultural framing of the world. In this context, the sea is not only an element of study, a subject of art and a portrayal of dreams, but also and primarily a dynamic, well-rooted and living topographical element.

But while the Mediterranean stands central in this volume as a body of water, the commentaries also portray this water as an open world, enjoying at the one end a particular and deepening connection with Africa and Asia Minor through maritime, land and river connections, and at the other end developing and maintaining an intense relationship with the open Atlantic and its immense potential. In this analysis of openness, the Mediterranean appears as a key piece in a Eurasian world economy, as portrayed by Janet Abu-Lughod, but at the same time far from unique in the developing globalized world.⁴

The dynamic fluidity inculcated by the Mediterranean on its islands and shores, and even beyond its natural borders, offers historians a rare sense of permanent movement. These movements have translated into various types of historical events, ranging from mass migrations to trade and warfare in a plurality of directions and within different cultural constellations. Wherever they occur, these events are rarely simple to explain; in the Mediterranean world, however, migrations have often been multi-ethnic and pluri-'national', while trade has frequently been multidirectional instead of bilateral, and warfare has rarely pitted one country or city against another, but has instead tended to involve a complex alliance of cultural groups defined by ethnicity, language,

religion, place of origin or family kinship. The sections on 'Seafaring', 'Wars in Ottava Rima' and 'Views of Africa' consequently showcase the fluid complexity that the Mediterranean imposed on its peoples and visitors.

Complex environments, like complex stories, tend to provoke human imagination, while imagination itself becomes an instrument for comprehending, dissecting and understanding the complexity. For these reasons, and for countless generations, the Mediterranean has been the source of inspiration for many. The sections on 'Utopian Literature', 'Travel Diaries and Travelogues', 'Paper and Ideas in Motion' and 'Cabinets of Curiosities' introduce readers to the multifaceted forms in which authors, curators and observers have sought to apprehend and represent the multiple complexities brought about by Mediterranean fluidity. Instead of a unitary focus on the exotic, the beautiful or the singular, writers and collectors have deconstructed the Mediterranean, in all its facets, in order to question, explain and preserve the idea of this fluid space as part of personal and collective memory formation. In this sense, many of the objects now considered works of art embody the conceptual definition of lieux de mémoire as introduced in current historiography by Pierre Nora.⁵

In this broad view of the Mediterranean, we can identify markers of what may be considered a global world. Each object, and its respective analysis by the various contributors to this volume, mirrors bilateral, trilateral and multilateral forms of contact. These multiple forms of contact, in turn, are consistent with a dynamic world of people heavily reliant on exchanges outside their original prescriptive intellectual and physical environments, in an open conceptualization of their own space.

In these different forms of contact we can see interchangeable forms of communication that have facilitated interactions over time. These interactions, expressed in individual and collective terms, went beyond the commonalities of trade or the formation of markets where commodities were bought and sold. Interactions originated, developed and crystalized in the marketplace, as much as in the different actors' lodges, study rooms and cabinets of curiosities.

While contacts stand at the very inception of interactions, the two cannot be conceived without the circulation that the Mediterranean and its outside links, in their fluidity and dynamism, have fostered for as far back as the region's history has been recorded. Circulation stands at the very core of transferences of perceptions, knowledge and distinct know-how across different social spaces, political borders and intellectual frontiers. In this sense, it cannot be conceived without the displacement and replacement of people, ideas and commodities within and far beyond the Mediterranean.

⁵ Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992), 4 vols.

6 Maria Fusaro, 'After Braudel: A Reassessment of Mediterranean History Between the Northern Invasion and the Caravane Maritime', in: Maria Fusaro, Colin J. Heywood and Mohamed-Salah Omri, eds, *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean. Braudel's Maritime Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010): 1–23. M. Fusaro, B. Allaire, R. Blakemore, T. Vanneste, and M. Dunford (eds), *Law, Labour and Empire: Comparative Perspectives on Seafarers, c. 1500–1800* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

The intricacies and co-dependencies forged by contacts, interactions and circulations resulted in a level of integration between the maritime and the landed frontier of the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and between the Mediterranean as a whole and the rest of the known world, on the other. This integration, in permanent transformation, is possibly the best mechanism for measuring the intensity of both endogenous and exogenous connections across this complex, although fascinating space.

Perhaps one of the best examples of contact that developed into interaction and, through circulation, became integrated and transposed in its entirety to other parts of the world is the practice of commercial and maritime law imported from the Mediterranean by the actions of European and Ottoman subjects in Eurasia, Africa and later the Atlantic world, as substantially argued by Maria Fusaro.⁶ Indeed, almost all the selected objects contain substantial traces of many of Fusaro's arguments.

In order to decodify and integrate the Mediterranean experience, as portrayed in *Encounters at Sea*, as part of a universal historical process, we need to contextualize it along its different roads of diffusion. This diffusing of Mediterranean mobilities and the transposition of these mobilities into the wider world through individuals (mariners and seafarers, for example) or ideas (such as the system of law) created a mutual world of influences in their wake. Indeed, the Mediterranean's role in transmitting its view of the universe to other systems and worlds was as significant as its receptiveness to being influenced by the diffusion of similar or critically different perceptions as outputs of other maritime worlds. The relationships between the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian and Red Seas, the intimate link to the Indian Ocean, traceable for millennia, or the permanent searches beyond the pillars of Hercules into the Atlantic are but a few examples of such mutually influential streams of diffusion.

While diffusion is often difficult to identify and study in primary sources, it can be assessed by a systematic analysis of the outreach that people, objects, ideas, commodities and markets facilitate. This outreach can be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively, having in mind the specific objects the Riccardiana made available for the original exhibition and also this overview. In a nutshell, outreach opens a window of understanding for researchers seeking to identify the Mediterranean in the world and similarly the world as perceived within the Mediterranean in its different facets. Contrary to contemporary perceptions, however, outreach does not necessarily imply only positive outcomes, but rather encompasses a world of both positive and negative outcomes, and positive and negative co- and interdependencies, all of which are bound to change over time.

Outreach is often used as a synonym of dispersal and expansion. However, these are three distinct concepts. Dispersal, in the particular case of the Mediterranean and the work at hand, is exemplified by the internal and external voyages of the objects and ideas, either supported physically by specific materials or conveyed simply by being displayed within the internal workings of this particular space. At times, this internal dispersal overcomes the borders of the space itself and takes on a global significance, as exemplified in many of the objects reproduced in this current volume.

Outreach and dispersal tend to work in tandem and are often wrongfully identified as markers of a civilization in the sense of a common system of values or as part of a cultural unity. From this perspective, both themes are prone to be associated with civilizational expansion. This is a concept often loosely mentioned by historians and easily operationalized for the Mediterranean world, given that this was a space that was bound, well into the twentieth century, by the inner and outer workings of multiple and diverse empires. In this context, expansion is often uniquely applied when connecting the idea of the Mediterranean with that of empire, rather than when connecting it with the outreach and dispersal of processes that can be regarded as universal and thus global in their many facets.⁷

The need to extrapolate the notion of expansion is paramount to understanding the attraction that the mobility of people, objects and ideas has had for scholars, both now and in the past. This attraction, formed in and around the co-, inter- and intra-dependencies of Mediterranean history, reflects the multiple global relationships between this space and the wider world, and transformed this fluid space into the ‘Great Sea’ as voiced within the Hebraic tradition.

⁷ This conceptual and methodological framework for analysing Mediterranean mobilities is heavily inspired by a new wave of considerations about Global History as framed in James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz and Chris Wickham, eds, *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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This volume arose from an exhibition at the Riccardiana Library in Florence (13 February – 12 June 2020), organized as part of the COST Action CA18140 'People in Motion: Entangled Histories of Displacement Across the Mediterranean (1492–1923)'. Known as 'PIMo' for short, this major humanities research project is authored and coordinated by Giovanni Tarantino (University of Florence) and Katrina O'Loughlin (Brunel University London), and explores issues relating to displacement, connectivity, disconnection, moving and plural identities and knowledge, motion and emotions. Its aim is to unravel and chart the entangled histories of displacement of human subjects *within and from* the Mediterranean

between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries. By introducing emotion to the study of dislocated people, PIMo interrogates historical materials in fresh ways, and seeks to add new layers of understanding to research findings, in the conviction that emotions follow different logics of place, travel, and time.



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