Prologue on Mediterranean City between Myth and Reality

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This prologue to the narratives unfolding in the present volume puts forward some open and necessarily inconclusive reflections on the Mediterranean city, between myth and reality. The volume collects the papers of the international conference *Mediterranean Cities. Myth and/or Reality*, which took place at Monte Verità in September 2012; it is divided into three parts: the first acts as a prologue providing an overview of the main questions related to the Mediterranean cities; the second part, as the title suggests, focuses mostly on the Mediterranean cities of the past and some related literary and mythical narratives; while the third part is devoted to the most recent developments and configurations of the Mediterranean cities of today. The main objective of this book is to show the powerful impacts that a broad range of discourses – literary, mythological, filmic, touristic, architectural, artistic – have on Mediterranean cities.

The multidisciplinary and multicultural approach has clearly influenced our choice to publish a multilingual book – to convey the wide range and complexity of perspectives and "gazes" brought together by the authors and the topic itself. The book may be approached from various perspectives: from the past to the present, from literature to art, from communication to architecture.

We begin from the theoretical assumption that, far from being a paradigmatic, univocal and a-temporal entity, the Mediterranean city is really several different entities emerging from, and interwoven with, an array of narratives and discourses. A myth is at the very heart of these overlapping chronicles, these layers of fiction. Bearing in mind that, originally, myth meant "account" or "tale", it was indeed myth that gave birth to, and then tells, the story of the origin of the cities of the Mediterranean Basin.

Consider, for instance, the many founding myths which track the genesis
and growth of cities in the Mediterranean region, or consider Ulysses, the
polytropos hero who, travelling from East to West, even managed to found
Lisbon: indeed this city was for years called *Olissipona*, the city of Ulysses
the traveller[1].

Several expressions, or variations, of myth – defined by Lévi-Strauss
as a combination of its variants – are discussed by the authors of the pa-
pers collected here. Thus, Sonia Macrì tells us about founding myths, na-
mely the mythical tales behind cities like Syracuse, Rome and Eleusis, all
of which were based on feminine figures that metamorphosed into spring
wells[2]. Susanne Endwitz recounts the genesis of the myth of cosmopo-
litan Alexandria, whose beginnings are to be found mainly in European
literature between 1850 and 1950, and which comes across as particularly
long-lived. She compares the descriptions of "colonial" Durrell with those
of "post-colonial" al-Karrat[3]. The myth of Tangiers is not unlike that of
Alexandria: Tangiers, too, is an international and border city, with a rich
interweaving and overlapping of native and colonial narratives – and these
are the subject of Natalia Ribas-Mateos's paper[4]. Between Alexandria and
Tangiers, in an imaginary space, lies the city of Cyrtha, of Salim Bachi,
which prompted Patrick Crowley to reflect on the association between the
myth of the Mediterranean city and nationalism[5].

Filippo Andrei describes not only what happened at the time of the
Crusades in Jerusalem, but also events created by the poetic imagination,
in particular in *Chanson de Jérusalem*. This goes to show how difficult it
often is to tell apart history from hagiography in the accounts of the main
events set in the Mediterranean[6]. Barcelona is a literary city par excellence,
on account of its Don Quixote, the most literary and most visionary of
characters in Mediterranean literature, as described by Stone[7].

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[1] B. Westphal, *L'oeil de la Méditerranée*, Tour d'Aigues: L'Aube, 2005.

[2] S. Macrì, *Being water. Myths of Springs and Waters in Greece and Rome*, in this volume, p. 79.

[3] S. Enderwitz, *Alexandria in Post-Colonial Literary Terms*, in this volume, p. 211.

[4] N. Ribas-Mateos, *Ville-mythe et loin du mythe tangérois*, in this volume, p. 311.

[5] P. Crowley, *Mythologizing the City, Rethinking the Nation: Salim Bachi's Cyrtha Trilogy*, in this volume, p. 267.

[6] F. Andrei, *Rappresentazioni leggendarie e narrazioni storiche della Città Santa nella "Chanson de Jérusalem"*, in this volume, p. 115.

[7] R. Stone, *Barcelona: Narrating Destiny in "Don Quixote"*, in this volume, p. 109.

Some initial considerations are in order on the central role of cities in today's societies, the complexity and stratification of the term "Mediterranean", and the forms of the idea of Mediterranean city. Scholars are paying renewed attention to these cities and all their transformations, fuelled by the crucial significance that they have acquired in our contemporary world and the globalization phenomena affecting them. For the first time in human history, today the majority of the population is concentrated in urban areas. By 2030, six out of ten people will live in a city; a proportion expected to increase to seven out of ten people by 2050.

According to Saskia Sassen, the city is the advanced space of our worst global problems: conflict, technological change, social injustice, and migration fluxes. It is, in other words, a vantage point from which to observe the glaring contradictions of that new assemblage between sovereignty, territory and rights typical of globalization[8].

From very early on, the Mediterranean has been, if not the first, probably the most urbanized area in the world before the sixteenth century. The phrase "Mediterranean cities" calls up a multitude of images, representations, even preconceptions and stereotypes. A lot has been written on Mediterranean cities, and from different perspectives: travellers, merchants, historians, geographers, writers; and more recently, sociologists, anthropologists, economists, architects, urban planners, and politicians have all made their contribution. Films continue to be made in which the Mediterranean city plays a prominent role. Several academic disciplines continue to be promoted research and projects on Mediterranean urban space.

The Mediterranean appears to be, according to Anna Maria Lorusso and Patrizia Violi, a trouble-free object in daily conversation; but the truth is, in the words of the two semiologists, that we are dealing with a "nominalist illusion", «the frequent occurrence of the use of one and the same term that constructs the effect of a corresponding homogeneous reality. However, within one and the same term may be found many different meanings, sometimes overlapping, sometimes heterogeneous, thus necessitating a work of textual analysis … In short, we are facing a geographical

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[8] S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: from Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

and anthropological reality that is fairly heterogeneous, and which corresponds to an apparently non-equivocal reality linguistically speaking – from tourism to Mediterranean Studies and other institutions, there are numerous social discourses that refer to the Mediterranean as if it were something well defined and distinct»[9].

It makes little sense to posit the existence of "one" Mediterranean city as long as the Mediterranean is seen not so much as a geographical – or ecological, to use Horden and Purcell's word – area, but rather as a cultural and discourse construct, not to say a scientific invention[10]. Besides, it is unthinkable to postulate the existence of a Mediterranean city impervious to the changes that have redesigned the framework and the biographies of the cities over the centuries.

Clearly, any reflection on the Mediterranean city implies an analysis of the use of «Mediterranean». Even allowing for the inherent fragility of Mediterranean studies as a discipline, we can take it for granted that a Mediterranean city exists in discourse representations, yet we are also aware that defining «Mediterranean» becomes harder and more complex when it qualifies the noun «city».

Cities – Peregrine Horden reminds us in his paper – are at the very heart of the Mediterranean debate, as proven by a long historiographical tradition, which identified precisely in cities and in their mutual interactions the fundamental and constitutive element of the Mediterranean. Not unalterable, of course, but to a certain degree stable and recognizable for its models[11]. Horden and Purcell, for their part, recommend beginning from the concept of "micro-ecologies": cities, or "large settlements" to use their terminology, do not generate change in and of themselves, whereas what is significant is «the social institutions and processes that develop and move within and across them»[12].

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[9] A.M. Lorusso - P. Violi, *The Mediterranean Effect*, in this volume, p. 251.

[10] For more on this, see the interesting publication of M.-N. Bourguet *et al.*, *L'invention scientifique de la Méditerranée*, Paris: Éd. de l'EHESS, 1998.

[11] P. Horden, *Meshwork: Towards a Historical Ecology of Mediterranean Cities*, in this volume, p. 37.

[12] P. Horden - N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Over time, scholars have codified some ideal types of cities – classical, Islamic, medieval for example – and these were often set up in opposition to each other under the macro-category of the Mediterranean city. Alexander Lopasic provides an overview of the Mediterranean cities through the successive stages and developments in the history of the region[13].

As a result of these categories' gaining ground, however, we are left with a limited range of social, economic and cultural characteristics captured by the ideal types of Weberian cities, which fail to do justice to all of the variables of urban areas.

The city is polysemous; it is both «articulated city» and «articulating city» as declared by Isabella Pezzini and Gianfranco Marrone in *Senso e metropoli*[14]. During a lecture he gave in Naples in 1967, Roland Barthes, inspired by the portrait of Paris that Victor Hugo depicted in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, illustrated the discursive dimension implied in the city: «The city is a discourse, and this discourse is a downright language; the city talks to its own inhabitants and we talk our city, the city where we stay, simply in inhabiting it, going through it (traverse, sweep), to watching it»[15]. This is the vein that inspires Rossana Bonadei in her paper, where the city is seen as «a textual body, growing in time and space through a proliferation which is grounded in words and shapes as well as in the solid matter of which cities are made»[16]. Bonadei relates «the notion of palimpsest, which tells us of strata exposed to loss and erasing» to the Mediterranean city «with its millennial history of layers and contaminations, the perfect example of what might be considered as one the densest historical and cultural palimpsests in the world»[17].

Although it requires some rethinking, the metaphor of the city as text «seems to hold up contemporary transformations of the urban realities»[18]

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[13] A. Lopasic, *Mediterranean Cities: Myth and Reality*, in this volume, p. 13.

[14] G. Marrone - I. Pezzini (eds.), *Senso e metropoli*, Roma: Meltemi, 2008. In the original text «la città enunciata» and «la città che enuncia».

[15] R. Barthes, *Semiology and the Urban*, in N. Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge, 1997.

[16] R. Bonadei, *"Uru-sag", "polis" and "civitas". The Matrix of the Mediterranean Urbanities*, in this volume, p. 17.

[17] *Ibid*.

[18] G. Marrone - I. Pezzini (eds.), *Senso e metropoli*.

especially if matched with the less exploited and reverse metaphor of the text as city.

Despina in Calvino's *The Invisible Cities* by «showing a different face to those who approach it from the sea and those who approach it from inland» conjures up the outline of Mediterranean cities[19]: «every city draws its shape from the desert, its counterpart; this is the way camel drivers and seamen view Despina, border city between two deserts»[20]. This description recalls quite vividly some Mediterranean port cities standing on the border between sea and inland, such as Algiers, Naples, Barcelona, Marseilles, and Beirut. It also highlights one of the key issues that remain unsolved in this specific area; it concerns the Mediterranean question in a broader sense, namely the intrinsic relation between sea and land, between the open sea and the mainland (i.e. what stretches away inland from the coastline) – in modern terms: off-shore and on-shore[21]. Are we to classify as Mediterranean only those cities that front on to the sea; or do we label as such also those cities that are located in Mediterranean countries, inland, so to speak, and without a sea view?

A whole variety of possible answers may be given, but what is certain is that borders and boundaries in the Mediterranean are adjusted as the need arises, change into centres of mediation or conflict, and are never determined once and for all. Some cities build their identity precisely on the dividing line between sea and land, between port and city proper; others feed on it from a distance. It is precisely on the sea-port city of Beirut that Peter Slugett and Fabian Stremmel have directed their attention. Their papers tells us about the developments and transformations of this multi-ethnic and multi-denominational[22].

Boundaries and dividing lines in the Mediterranean can be lengthened or shortened depending on whether the beholder is short-sighted or long-

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[19] I. Calvino, *Le città invisibili*, Torino: Einaudi, 1972, p. 7.

[20] *Ibid*. Both passages quoted from Calvino have been translated by the author of this introductory essay.

[21] A term that Horden and Purcell are thinking of replacing because of the one-sidedness, the a-priori passivity or subordination implied by hinterland. Please refer to the paper by Horden, in this volume.

[22] P. Sluglett, *Nineteenth/Early Twentieth Century Beirut: The Explosive Growth of an East Mediterranean Port City*, in this volume, p. 157 and F. Stremmel, *The Creation of Christian and Muslim Urban Identities: French and German schools in fin de siècle Beirut*, in this volume, p. 169.

sighted; which is tantamount to saying that no definition is permanent, or inalterable. The borderline between sea and mainland is undoubtedly the stylistic hallmark of all Mediterranean narratives. That notwithstanding, it is very hard to draw clear-cut boundaries and the demarcation line may be extended as far as the Alps, which physically and symbolically mark the divide between the most important Mediterranean civilizations and the Barbarians. Alpine crossings and Mediterranean cities are the main theme of *Gesta* by Otto of Freising, writes Roberto Leggero[23].

Perils and threats are often the gifts of a sea with unclear borders: enemies, pirates, epidemics, migrants. Sofiane Bouhdiba details and analyses the protective strategies adopted by colonial powers to shield Mediterranean cities from cholera outbreaks in the 19th century[24].

Calvino's statement, quoted above, invites us to ponder the complexity and consequent variations of perspectives. Observers often come from different shores, and do not use a common alphabet to express and define things and situations. Not least because the Mediterranean as a cognitive category continues to belong to the Northern shores; as such, it is exclusive.

The epistemological problem, which naturally takes in the political, social and cultural dimension, also addresses the question whether the model of ideal European city is applicable to North African and Middle Eastern cities, which Kenneth Brown calls MENA cities[25]. No need to repeat that the infrastructure of cities within these geographical areas have coagulated around political, cultural and social contexts quite different from those of northern shores of the Mediterranean.

The debate on Mediterranean cities is criss-crossed by key topics including borders, migrations, cosmopolitanism, heritage and identity. For centuries now, the Mediterranean has provided a stage, an arena for differences that have endured through time and continue to resist all but forced integrations. The Mediterranean city has its peculiar habit of kee-

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[23] R. Leggero, *Qui e a Roma si beve lo stesso vino. Passaggi alpini e città mediterranee nei "Gesta" di Ottone di Frisinga*, in this volume, p. 89.

[24] S. Bouhdiba, *La protection des cités méditerranéennes contre le choléra au XIXᵉ siècle*, in this volume, p. 147.

[25] K. Brown, *Cities of the Middle East and North Africa: a Historical Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2007.

ping public and private spaces separate. This is apparent in the significant high density of its relational spaces, one of the recurrent features of the Mediterranean city identified by Michele Morbidoni in his paper on informality and the Mediterranean settlement traditions[26]. Informality characterises not only building work in Mediterranean urban areas, but also its social relations. The relationship between public and private space is vital in all of Benjamin's cityscapes, as Mauro Pala reminds us, when he assumes a Mediterranean heterotopia in Benjamin's *Naples*[27]. This is true not only of the peculiar relation between public and private space, but also of the relation with the past. Mediterranean cities are burdened with the responsibility of tackling their monumental past and nurturing the material and symbolic footprints without ignoring the challenges of contemporary societies. For instance, several cities, as we read in Gilda Tentorio, have a "logo-monument", namely a macro-sign of identity, acting as an indispensable landmark for the citizens and their narratives, as well as for the architects and tourists. «What thread is there still to connect Athens with its mythical-memorial past? Is this city capable of bearing the weight of its past glory, without obscuring the vital peculiarities of its current status?» Such are the legitimate and charged questions analysed by Gilda Tentorio[28]. The ruins scattered around the Mediterranean region, the Parthenon being the noblest and most emblematic, suggest «a sort of time outside history which the individual gazing over them is receptive to, almost as if it helped him recognize and understand its duration flowing through him»[29]. Such is the gaze that comes to rest on Cuma, Pompei, and Pozzuoli, in the paper by Slobodan Paich. Here, the author compares them to the ideal cities painted by Piero della Francesca in order «to evoke a sense of the memorable links and ideas associated with the Mediterranean city and city-states that resonate across time and contribute to the notions of urbanity as a

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[26] M. Morbidoni, *Informalità e tradizioni insediative mediterranee: percorsi evolutivi della città "senza progetto"*, in this volume, p. 285.

[27] M. Pala, *The Porous City's Potential: Naples as Benjamin's Mediterranean Heterotopia?*, in this volume, p. 191.

[28] G. Tentorio, *Atene e Acropoli: proiezioni mentali e inquietudini nell'immaginario contemporaneo*, in this volume, p. 221.

[29] M. Augé, *Rovine e macerie. Il senso del tempo*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004, p. 37.

cultural phenomenon»[30]. Nassima Dris, on the other hand, reflects on the attitude of the inhabitants of Algiers, who build up a relation to their urban heritage, especially from the colonial period, by emphasizing the existence of a shared "wealth" in which all dividing lines between cultures have blurred and vanished[31].

A fitting instrument to achieve a rewarding mediation between a demanding past and an uncertain future may be found in contemporary art. This is what Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio argues in his paper, and illustrates to what extent the study of the Mediterranean permeates contemporary art: «the process of representation of the Mediterranean city – fully aware of the numerous narratives derived from a complex variety of spaces and intercultural, interreligious territories, now in conflict, now at peace – often requires a little help from the imagination to analyse its complexities and planning ahead for the future»[32]. This is a process which the artist Mona Hatoum is very good at, in particular with her «paradoxical maps» of the Mediterranean, as reported by Bertrand Westphal[33]. A close study of the Mediterranean cities cannot fail to integrate and represent the conflict and the violence which have occurred and still occur in these urban spaces: the hostilities dimension has long been covered up, concealed to the advantage of an idyllic and optimistic perspective, which banished conflicts and consigned them to oblivion. The uprisings of the so-called Arab Spring – with their epicentre located in city centre squares, the symbols par excellence of Mediterranean culture – have shattered the univocally "sunny" picture of the Mediterranean and exposed conflicts and marginalization in the light of day.

The itinerary is designed as a very long journey, which reaches the main urban destinations planned on the "traditional" Mediterranean tour, but also some that are less frequented, less widely-known, and more remote. It also offers a journey across space and time from the most ancient

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[30] S.D. Paich, *World, Underworld and Other World: Myth, enigma, reality and archeology of two ancient Mediterranean cities – Pozzuoli and Cumae*, in this volume, p. 55.

[31] N. Dris, *Entre les deux rives de la Méditerranée, un patrimoine urbain en partage*, in this volume, p. 297.

[32] H. Bashiron Mendolicchio, *Il viaggio verso il Mediterraneo: sentieri, cammini e crocevia nell'arte contemporanea*, in this volume, p. 345.

[33] B. Westphal, *Mappa paradossale del mito mediterraneo: Mona Hatoum*, in this volume, p. 355.

human settlements to the most visionary, futuristic urban installations by contemporary artists, where real and imaginary are separated by a very fine boundary line. Stages along the way include Cuma, Pozzuoli, Rome, Syracuse, Cyrtha, Tangiers, Barcelona, Beirut, Athens, Naples, Alexandria, Cairo, Jerusalem, Algiers, Civita di Bagnoregio, and many more.

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