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The Mediterranean in History

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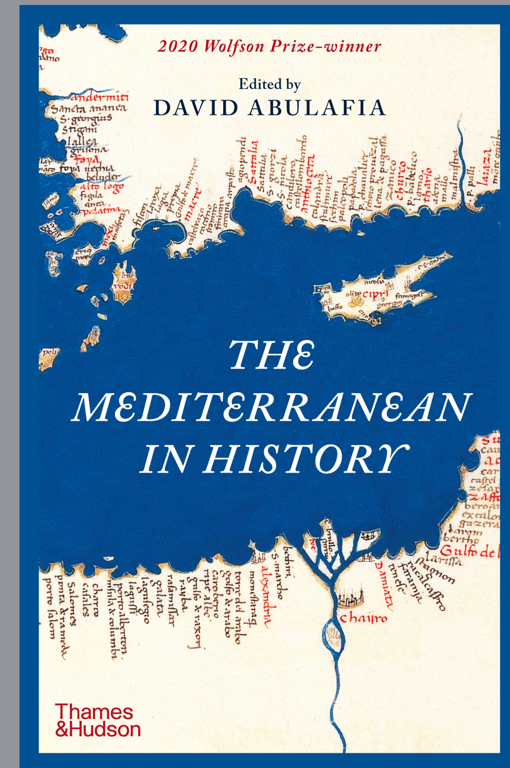

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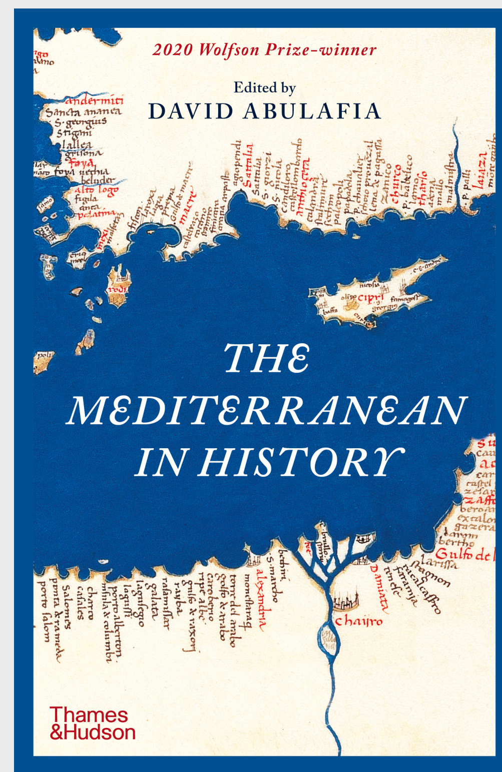

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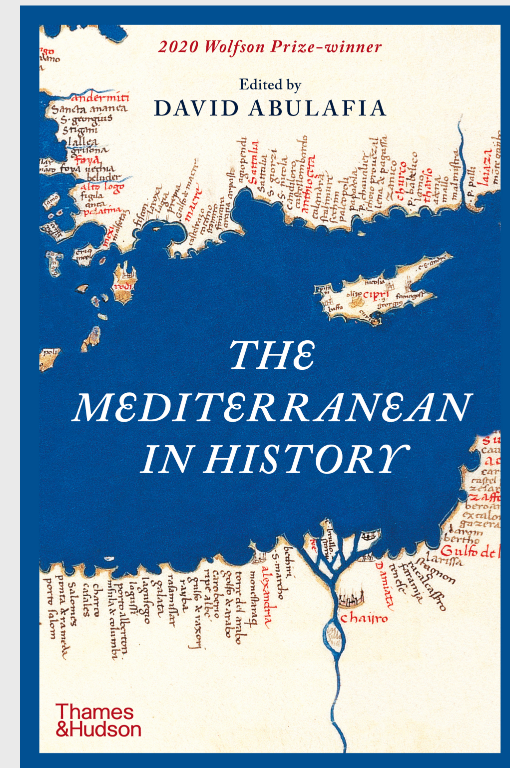
Key Sales Points

- Chronicles the rise and fall of Empires from Greece and Rome to Mussolini and Franco.
- David Abulafia is the winner of the 2020 Wolfson History Prize
- David Abulafia is an internationally renowned scholar and has been described by Andrew Roberts as ‘the greatest living historian of the Mediterranean’.



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Contents

Preface 9

Introduction: What is the Mediterranean? 12
DAVID ABULAFIA

ONE The physical setting 35
OLIVER RACKHAM

TWO The First Trading Empires: Prehistory to c. 1000 BC 58
MARLENE SUANO

THREE The battle for the sea routes: 1000 – 300 BC 93
MARIO TORELLI

FOUR The creation of *Mare Nostrum*: 300 BC – 500 AD 121
GEOFFREY RICKMAN

FIVE The Mediterranean breaks up: 500–1000 148
JOHN PRYOR

SIX A Christian Mediterranean: 1000 – 1500 178
MICHEL BALARD

SEVEN Resurgent Islam: 1500 – 1700 208
MOLLY GREENE

EIGHT The Mediterranean as a battleground of the European powers: 1700–1900 237
JEREMY BLACK

NINE A globalized Mediterranean: 1900–2000 265
DAVID ABULAFIA

Further reading 301

Sources of illustrations 325

Index 326

'Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground'

Byron – Childe Harold, II 88

INTRODUCTION
What is the Mediterranean?

DAVID ABULAFIA

The question does not admit of a straightforward answer. At first glance the boundaries of the Mediterranean appear well defined by the coastline that runs from the rock of Gibraltar along Spain and southern France, around Italy and Greece to Turkey, Lebanon, Israel and then the entire coast of North Africa as far as Ceuta, the Spanish town on the tip of Morocco, opposite Gibraltar. But the Mediterranean cannot simply be defined by its edges. Within this space there are dozens of islands which have enormous significance for the history of the Mediterranean: the largest is Sicily, closely followed by Sardinia, but any historian of the Mediterranean would also wish to lay heavy stress upon the importance of Crete and Cyprus, as well as much smaller islands such as Santorini, the home of a flourishing prehistoric culture, or Elba, source of iron to the Etruscans. Small islands abound between the Greek and Turkish mainlands and along the coast of Croatia. But the Mediterranean is also divided into a western and eastern section by the Sicilian Straits between Sicily itself and Tunisia, an area of water that contains the remarkable Maltese islands, home to a Christian society which has preserved for over a millennium the language of its medieval Arab conquerors.

The first question is whether to identify the Mediterranean in terms of its water, its islands, its coasts or indeed the civilizations and states that have emerged along its coasts. For the highly influential French historian Fernand Braudel, lauded in his day as 'the greatest living historian', what was important was the way the physical geography of the Mediterranean moulded the civilizations

that grew up on its shores, and (as will be seen) a long way inland. His was a view that laid considerable emphasis on the physical constraints that had determined human behaviour. Thus in his classic work The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II he paid detailed attention to land forms, particularly the contrast between mountain and plain, in order to argue that there were also fundamental differences between the societies that grew up in mountain and plain. This theme emerged out of his intense study of geography and his experiences as a young academic in French Algeria. His emphasis on the longue durée, the features of Mediterranean society that changed only slowly over time, sat rather uneasily alongside his attempt to explain the policies of the Spanish king Philip II in the late sixteenth-century Mediterranean, and it is fair to say that his work is still consulted for its insights into the relationship between geography and history, but rather less for its information about King Philip II. His school of historians was long scornful of the sort of history that was built around the study of political events; to be accused of writing histoire événementielle was for a time regarded as a damning criticism, particularly among French historians. But for Braudel this confinement of Philip II to the end of the second volume of his great work was right, since even the triumph of the Spaniards over Ottoman sea power was a reflection of deeper realities rooted in the geography of the Mediterranean lands. It was a history 'in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles', and therefore poor Philip II recedes from view in most of Braudel's work, while the Mediterranean at times enlarges to include not merely Madeira but Cracow.

The need to take individuals into account in understanding the history of the Mediterranean, even what would now be called its economic history, was well understood by one of its first historians: Thucydides. His History of the Peloponnesian War is significant here because it stresses the ways in which sea empires or 'thalassocracies' are created, and shows an exceptional understanding of the nature of

accounts of diverse cult centres, such as that at Shiloh, and of the attempts to centralize the worship of God in the new sanctuary at Jerusalem around 1000 BC. This was accompanied by the emergence of a literate élite, who adapted the Phoenician alphabet; by the time of the Babylonian exile in 586 BC the prophet Jeremiah and the scribe Baruch were active in collecting and collating the traditions and laws of the Hebrews. Although religious tradition attributes the first five books of the Bible to Moses, who was said to have received them from God, the overwhelming tendency of modern scholarship, Jewish as well as Christian, has been to see them as a late compilation, pieced together from a variety of priestly traditions, and finally edited by Ezra the scribe at the end of the sixth century, when the Jews (as they can now be called) returned to their homeland after a brief but painful sojourn by the waters of Babylon. The land the Israelites inhabited provided livelihoods for wheat and barley farmers, for shepherds and goatherds; its material remains, except for occasional luxury items that may have graced a princely court, suggest that this was a land in which life was lived simply. What it produced were religious and social ideas, not luxury artefacts. Although some of the moral themes present in early Hebrew literature have points in common with neighbouring cultures (comparisons have often been made between the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi and the law codes of the Pentateuch), the double emphasis on service to one God and on God's demands for living an ethical life were unprecedented.

Thus, tossed between Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, the Hebrew religion and indeed the Jewish people were forged in the eastern Mediterranean crucible. Though the Hebrews sought to reject Pharaonic Egypt and the temptations of Babylon, their experiences of Egypt and Mesopotamia lay at the root of the experiences which led them to see the working of the hand of God in history.

THREE
The battle for the sea routes: 1000 – 300 BC

MARIO TORELLI

During the second half of the second millennium BC, we can observe particularly intense and profitable navigation back and forth across the Mediterranean, which constituted an 'inner lake' of immense proportions linking southern Europe, north Africa and the Near East. The protagonists were the Aegean peoples, first of all the Minoans of Crete and then the Mycenaeans, who were in the first instance interested in the Near East, which was a source not only of precious goods, particularly the cloths and prestige objects produced by the great civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia, but also of raw materials, such as the copper that came from the rich mines of Cyprus and the precious stones that came from the Fertile Crescent. The Aegean navigators remained, as far as can be seen, undisturbed in their mastery of Mediterranean navigation between the fourteenth and the twelfth centuries BC; and they interested themselves both in the supply of goods to the courts of the great lords or wanakes of the mainland and the islands, and, above all, in the carrying trade between the Aegean and the coasts of Syria and Palestine, linking these regions to the central Mediterranean, and even occasionally reaching as far as the Iberian peninsula. In the last forty years the evidence for a Mycenaean presence on the coast of southern Italy, in Sicily and in Sardinia has grown to such an extent that it is no exaggeration to speak, in many cases, of genuine settlements by groups or by individuals of Mycenaean origin. Although the number

of places visited by these navigators was not enormous, what is striking is the early date of their arrival, and even more so the quantity and quality of the Mycenaean goods often found there, whether on inhabited sites or inside tombs, all of which leads one to think of a permanent presence of Mycenaeans. The analysis of many thousands of Mycenaean ceramics found on the site of the future Greek colony of Metaponton in southern Italy, at Termitito in modern Basilicata, has revealed that alongside ceramics imported from the heartlands of the Mycenaean world, in particular the region around Argos, a significant quantity of pottery was in fact of local manufacture.

These distant enterprises are often linked by modern observers, without a great deal of evidence, to stories of Greek heroes that spread among the native inhabitants of the newly settled lands, as a means of legitimizing Greek territorial conquests and the creation of diplomatic ties with barbarian peoples. However, the enterprises can also be regarded as an essential foundation of those features that would come to characterize the commercial traffic of the Mediterranean throughout the pre-Roman age: the combination of mercantile contact and colonial settlement. For the routes followed by Phoenician and then Greek merchants would replicate to a large extent those of the Mycenaean traders, extending them further in ways that were to some degree predetermined by those traders. And, just as in the Bronze Age, these merchants were able to supply the more highly evolved civilizations of the Near East with the raw materials and other goods that they needed, receiving in exchange luxury goods that were much esteemed by the indigenous cultures further west. At the same time, however, the relationship fostered by the merchants with the peoples of the western Mediterranean were never limited simply to commercial exchange, but rapidly gave way to developments that went beyond simple trade. Indeed, if conditions were right, that is, if the native population was relatively weak and yet there were rich agricultural resources, the transition from mercantile contact to colonial foundation became an almost natural

one. But if the native populations was militarily powerful and able to prevent the intrusion of colonial settlements, commercial contacts by themselves remained the principal vehicle for the transfer of technical know-how, with the arrival of individuals in possession of skills which were unknown locally but were highly prized.

In motives and methods, later contacts across the Mediterranean thus followed the pattern of those in the Mycenaean period, and this applies as much to the Phoenicians as it does to the Greeks. In fact, there is little difference between the way these two groups operated. Even if they followed different routes, they were all laid out in the Bronze Age by their Aegean precursors. Here we can look at the settlements on islands or peninsulas close to the land where trade was being directed: in the Bronze Age the islands of Vivara in the Gulf of Naples or the peninsula of Thapsos in Sicily, and in the first millennium the islands of Pithecusa, the first Greek base in the Tyrrhenian Sea, of Motya and Ibiza, which were Phoenician outposts in Sicily and in Spanish waters, as was the promontory of Cádiz, isolated by its surrounding marshes. Like the Mycenaeans, both Phoenicians and Greeks were interested in sources of metals, and like them the main commodities they carried were luxury goods, which were as much in demand in the first millennium BC as they had been in the second.

Trade at the start of the first millennium BC: Tyrrhenians, Phoenicians and Euboeans

The end of the Bronze Age and the start of the 'Dark Age' was marked by profound changes in the entire eastern Mediterranean. Several large and powerful states in Greece and Anatolia, the Hittite Empire and the Mycenaean kingdoms, collapsed and a new political and ethnic order emerged in continental Greece, in the islands and in Asia Minor. The Mycenaean voyages, which had linked Greece and the Aegean to the Near East for much of the second millennium, without much sign of disturbance, suddenly ceased between the