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Mediterranean geopolitics, yesterday and tomorrow

G.-F. Dumont
"The Mediterranean is not a border, but a place for trade". This sentence of Fernand Braudel may appear surprising insofar as the sea coasts constitute borders incomparably better marked than the terrestrial borders. In fact, the interface ground-sea is and has often been a determinant of political entities. And yet, it is true that through History, the Mediterranean has often been a space amply frequented in order to meet the needs for trade. In particular, it found itself in the heart of a civilisation of which Europe is the main heiress today. However, at the beginning of the XXIst century, the Mediterranean appears relatively marginalised compared to the large economic axes of Europe and the principal political decision places. Thus, the Mediterranean zones relative weight in sales networks, except tourism, seems marginal (1) and the development of the Mediterranean Southern and Eastern banks remains to be improved. Furthermore, the worry of taking into consideration Mediterranean geopolitics does not seem meaningful. Even the European Union hardly concerns itself with the Latin arc. The European journalists inform us of the political tensions within the Indonesian archipelago; however the latter falls under a maritime surface considerably larger than that of the Mediterranean whose question of geopolitical balance is far from being clarified. The same Europeans look at the United States materialise a North-American free trade agreement associating two developed countries (the United States and Canada) with a developing one (Mexico) without imagining a Mediterranean free trade agreement.

If one wants to think of the possibility of a Mediterranean Common Market, it is not useless to put this nostrum pond into a historical perspective considering the Mediterranean geopolitical history until the end of the first millennial, period that we indicate under the old times formula, its posterior history having been more known in particular thanks to the work of Fernand Braudel.

The first question to be posed consists in studying the above mentioned
sentence veracity of the important histo-
rian for these old times (2) during which,
a priori, man did not have the current
techniques to dominate the sea. During
the first century before J.C., in his Odes,
Horace states the difficulty of the then
Mediterranean navigation. Celebrating
Virgile’s departure for Athens, he under-
lines how much the unworthy sea, with
its floods full of anger, was frightening.
But, he adds, audacious to face them all
human race broke all barriers (3).

Man thus surmounts physical obsta-
cles which the Mediterranean repres-
sents, making with this one exert an
essential role allowing exchanges
between bordering territories and over-
coming the frontiers effects that the sea
provokes. And a few decades after
Horace, the Mediterranean makes it pos-
sible for Rome to politically unify the
whole set of bordering countries. At the
beginning of the Christian era, the
Mediterranean thus forms between the
territories which border it a kind of
Common Market or rather single mar-
ket, according to the terminology used in
connection with the European Union or
of the European economic Space area.
The Mediterranean becomes for the
Romans the pond nostrum, our sea, thus
an inland sea, an as much political than
economic concept. Does this geopoliti-
cal place given to the Mediterranean,
deniable during the apogee of the
Roman Empire, also noted at other his-
torical periods? As it does not apply con-
tinuously in the ancient life of the
Mediterranean, that means the existence
of periods when, for lack of pond nos-
trum, it would be preferable to speak
about pond clausum, sea clause, the
Mediterranean being presented then
more in the form of a barrier then like a
link.

Actually, the geopolitical history of
the Mediterranean is discontinuous,
oscillating between rather pond nostrum
beneficial periods to populations living
standards by the reciprocal enrichments
permitted by trade, and others rather
pond clausum, at the time of obscure
moments not very favourable to the
improvement of living conditions and
having even recessive effects. Thus, this
sea between the grounds, according to
its etymology, has filled the functions of
gate or barrier between its bordering
people.

TWO GREAT CIVILISATIONS LIMITS

Quite common to all bordering coun-
tries, small or large, which surround it,
the Mediterranean appears initially as a
limit historically. Because of the exist-
ence of powerful civilisations on Asian
(Middle East) and African (East of
Northern Africa) territory, it could have
fulfilled a function of way towards the
Occident as it shall be later, for Western
Europe, the way toward the Orient, cov-
ered to seek luxury products, or in the
Middle Ages, to procure oneself spices.

But Mesopotamian and Egyptian
civilisations are primarily land: their
expansion results in particular from an
agro-pastoral revolution and clearing of
the swamps, and is based on the inven-
tion and the use of oxcart, the beats don-
key, or the wheel. For these civilisations,
the sea is presented primarily in the form
of a limit at their territory. Thus, Egypt is
hardly present on the Mediterranean and
Alexandria its large seaport, is founded
only in 332 before J.C. by the Greek colonists.

**PHOENICIANS MARITIME ROLE**

Nevertheless, starting from III millennium before J.C., the maritime techniques and practices take their expansion with the Phoenician marine people and the Aegean world. Even if one cannot speak any more of pond clausum, one cannot use the expression of pond nostrum, or only while considering such or such Mediterranean subset. Indeed, the Mediterranean abounds in small size, narrow and partitioned maritime spaces. It is parcelled out in subsets organised in chains (the Adriatic, Aegean, the Ionian, the Tyrrhenian Seas), closed by islands (Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Balearic Islands, Aegean archipelago), or peninsulas (Iberian, Italian, Balkan). In the absence of a single pond nostrum, there is local pond nostrum in conformity with the geography of various civilisations. Thus, Knossos, Centre of Cretan civilisation, extends its maritime empire on the Aegean Sea and made peace reign there, in particular during its apogee, from -1700 to -1400 before J.C. In Greece, the Achaens (4), considered as Indo-European people, settled by driving back the Peelings. They appear to be good sailors and their Aegean-Mycenaen civilisation (from -1580 to -1200 before J.C.), until the arrival of the people of the sea, Indo-European tribes, maintains trade relations with Crete, Egypt or Cyprus.

Previously, in the Eastern Mediterranean, Phoenicia created, as of the IIIrd millennium, a civilisation directed towards maritime trade. Phoenicians explore the shores and inaugurate trade routes, becoming ship brokers of great powers. After the collapse of the Achaen empire of the Aegean-Mycenaen (5) in the XIIth century before J.C., that of the empire Hittite (Anatolia at the end of the XIIIth century) and while the Egyptian empire declines, the Phoenician brokers become the most active tradesmen of the Mediterranean. Tyre is the principal port of the Eastern Mediterranean and Phoenicians found Carthage - name indicating the new city - towards -814 before J.C. They install a series of stopovers from Egypt to the Gibraltar Straits. Each one is distant of about thirty kilometres hence a boat day. These stopovers are initially of simple anchoring. Then some become temporary barter counters and others permanent establishments. Phoenicians export glass-makings from Lebanon, structural timber (cedars), and even skilled labour. They import in particular money and tin from the Iberian Peninsula, as murex from which they draw purple.

**GREEKS, THE MEDITERRANEAN MASTERS**

While the Tyre undergoes several dominations (Assyrian, neo-Babylonian, Persian) from the Vth to the IIth centuries before J.C., the colonists and Greek marines improve the art to navigate: they design more frayed ships, increasing the sail, and invent the anchor. They become the Masters of the Mediterranean dominated by two principal ports: Syracuse, founded in -734 by Corinthians, is essential like the largest
maritime city of the Mediterranean; then Piraeus, supplanting Corinth and Eginea, materialises the development of the maritime power of Athens. The Greeks export their maritime know-how then, for example in Massalia (Marseilles). This port, founded in -600 by Greeks originating from Phocae in minor Asia, becomes in the 1st Century the greatest Mediterranean tin trade centre, which comes from the Massif Central, the Armorican Massif, or British Cornouailles. Transported to Massalia, tin gains other Mediterranean areas. In exchange, the boats bring manufactured objects to Massalia: crockery, attic vases, jewels, salt, wine for which the independent Celts apparently expressed an immoderate taste (6). Following Greek colonisation, the vine growing is established in Gaul, but its production remains insufficient to satisfy the needs. Massalia thus redistributes the imported wine then produced in Gaul, even at long distances, as crater, and Wine cups (in Burgundy) prove it at the beginning of the Vth Century before J.C.

The expansion of Massalia is diffused on the Mediterranean coast, because Phocaeans scatter a series of colonies and counters between the Maritime-Alps and the Balearic Islands sea: Ampurias in Catalonia and Velia form with Massalia the principal Phocaeans commercial ports, although Massalia hardly has political influence. The force of the large Mediterranean ports rests on their capacities to fulfil some essential functions: initially, it is advisable to organise a good reception for the ships; then, the possibility of remaining in the port simplifies the tran-

shipments; that to offer naval carpenters in order to repair (and to build the boats beforehand) is invaluable; the capacity to be able to deliver drinking water on board is essential. In addition to the boat and navigators physical security which is naturally well imperative, trade security is just as necessary, which supposes rules making it possible to exchange goods and to be able to leave again with products whose importation is authorised. Trade security, is also the possibility of making benefit, which supposes bearable taxes and silver coining.(7)

A HISTORICAL EXCEPTION

After having reduced the Athenian power, which had admittedly weakened from the interior, Rome realises this exceptional historical location, a State bordering the totality of Mediterranean banks. Three essential stages punctuate this construction of the pond nostrum. Yielded in Athens by the Romans into -166, Delos becomes an international warehouse and a cosmopolitan centre, symbolising Rome's maritime expansion. In -146, Carthage destruction removes a significant rival from the Romans in the Mediterranean. Finally, the Roman Senate makes an essential decision in 67 before J.C.: Pompey, elected Consul, manages to obtain extraordinary capacities (lex Gabinia) to fight pirates who act ruthlessly in the Mediterranean. In three months, killing or capturing 30 000 pirates, Pompey founds the Roman Command in the Mediterranean, signing the disappearance of piracy at least until the IIIrd Century after J.C. The Mediterranean becomes then the Romans pond nos-
trum, whose Empire embraces all the Mediterranean basin orbis terrarum. The imperial time sees the apogee of maritime life, even if, in winter, the pond nostrum is generally a pond clausum because of navigation high risks during this season.

As sea transportation is easier and more economic than land carriage, the Mediterranean stopovers form the Empire's principal transport network system. The merchant navy uses the sail as propulsion instrument, while the oar remains small fishing boats prerogative and the warships so often shown in the peplums. The port of Ostia, 24 kilometres from Rome, knows its apogee in the 1st century, and the large wearing of Marseilles, Narbonne or Frejus attest Rome's commercial monopoly in the Mediterranean. Frejus (7) founded precisely in the 1st Century before J.C., is quoted by Cicero, Strabon, Pline or Tacit. It is a time considered as the second Roman port after Ostia, because of its significant market and its stage character place on the aurelian way. To a hundred kilometres in the East of Frejus, one can admire one of the most extraordinary monuments dominating still today the pond nostrum: the Alps trophy of the or August trophy (8), 46 meters high, symbolises part of Roman geopolitics, the link established by the Roman Empire between France's and Italy's current territories and the passages security of the alpine south arc. It attests the pax romana reality, obtained thanks to Rome domination of forty-four alpine people whose names are engraved on the trophy. Turn-headlight realised in 13 before J.C. with progressive withdrawal stages; this trophy is unique in the Mediterranean.

During this same time from the last century of the antiquity to the first of the Christian era, the Eastern Mediterranean, and more particularly the Holy City of Jerusalem, are connected to various Mediterranean banks (9), because Jews spread themselves on the Mediterranean circumference front, as after the destruction of the temple. Thus one finds Jewish centres with Ostia, Genoa, Bologna, Ravenne or Naples.

PIRACY RETURN

The end of the imperial unit marks that of pond nostrum unity. The decline starts in Western Mediterranean, then Eastern Mediterranean, before remaining active and prosperous, closes itself little by little. On the one hand, the end of the Roman Empire adventures remove people from maritime customs and many populations become country and continental fellows. Moreover, the needs for maritime trade decrease considerably taking into account the Roman world depopulation (10).

On the other hand, piracy return is accentuated in the Vth Century, before being taken in hand by Islamists sailors, and hardly encourages the rise of maritime trade. The ports which made the vitality of the pond nostrum decline or disappear, under the double effect of the economic recession and of their incapacity to ensure trade safety as well on the sea side as on the ground side.

During the second half of the Christian era 1st millennium, the pond
nostrum leaves the place to a pond clausum. The acuity questions related to insecurity is highlighted, à contrario, by the two Mediterranean ports which end up emerging in the last part of the 1st millennium: they correspond to locations naturally protected from the aggressions of the continent and profit from a natural geography enabling them to supervise from afar the possible maritime aggressions. Venice, protected by its lagoon, starts to be organised with the election of a first doge in 697. One century later begins the conquest of a maritime empire in Istria and Dalmatia. In Campania, Amalfi, protected by precipice reliefs, becomes, as from the IXth century, a flourishing maritime Republic, before sharing its functions with other Western Mediterranean ports, like Pisa and Genoa.

THE MEDITERRANEAN, ALWAYS STARTED AGAIN

Mediterranean geopolitical history alternates the worst and the best in its trade function and links between men. It remains primarily a pond clausum until men, Phoenicians, Greeks, then Romans manage to implement maritime techniques and know-how. During the time when the Mediterranean does not have on its local or regional circumference powers likely to ensure trade and transport safety, the Mediterranean tends to be a pond clausum. On the other hand, at each time and in each part of the Mediterranean where people’s and goods’ security reign, the Mediterranean reveals itself to be a significant trade fermenting agent, facilitating the rise of civilisations and contributing to improve populations living conditions. Because goods and services trade is never exclusively commercial. It implies other cultural and linguistic exchanges. It makes it possible to local customers to grow rich in contact with other ways of life.

These elements of Mediterranean geopolitics knowledge can guide contemporary geopolitical reflections: couldn’t the Mediterranean which was the centre of a Common Market during certain historical times become it in XXIst Century? Couldn’t that favour a balanced development of the whole set of bordering countries? This simple idea seems all the more realisable that the Mediterranean seems to be a rather favourite maritime space today, since it does not seem to undergo or to suffer much less from piracies than others like the southern China Sea, or, to a lesser extent, the North Sea.

The association of part of the neighbouring countries on the Northern Mediterranean in the European Union should be supplemented by a multilateral association of the whole set of Mediterranean countries with the European Union. So that the powers bordering the Mediterranean are aware of the importance of this stake, it would be appropriate that they acquire a geopolitical, economic, and ecological vision making the contemporary reality of a common pond nostrum obvious. The Mediterranean cultures played an essential role in the formation of Western civilisation and are in the heart of European identity roots (11). More recently, industrial revolution was done outside of it, taking into account the location of new sources of energy then
put into exploitation. But, in the XXIst century, the industrial era economic localisation constraints are null and void, and nothing prevents from thinking of the Mediterranean like a peaceful trade link between the three continents. Undoubtedly in this objective it is necessary to have the courage of restarting, by remembering the formula of Paul Valéry in "the marine cemetery: Sea, sea, always started again!"

NOTES

2 Horace, Odes, 1.3.
3 Homère indicates that under the term "Acheans" all Greeks participating to the Trojan War.
7 Today, Fréjus presents the best Roman archeological set conserved in France after Nîmes.