

# A Sea Change in the Mediterranean Connections: The Fall of Saharan Networks (18th-20th c.)\*

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In the field of the human sciences, the current debate on the Mediterranean societies is strongly marked by references to settled cultural patterns of classical literature and modern history, leading a resurgence of interest in ancient scenarios of “civilizations” and related patterns of representation. However, looking at the contemporary Mediterranean history from the southern edge of the sea, the deep change in the regional system of networks which was in action from the eighteenth century deeply contrasts with those patterns. Between 1750 and 1850 the Saharan trade system ruled for centuries by the Maghribi societies collapsed. Ottoman Africa and Morocco were both incorporated into the capitalist world economy.<sup>1</sup>

On the African side of the Mediterranean, the end of the Saharan networks as commercial infrastructure has wounded the experience of nomadism to death, thus causing migrations and urbanisation, and asking to open up to new ways of living in the desert, as it also happened in Central Asia and elsewhere. It came down to the birthing of the new urban Maghrib that occurred in a framework of shared modernization of the Mediterranean connections, both on northern and southern edges. A complete changeover occurred for the Maghrib, bringing its insular nature to an end. But yet, the new patterns of economic and cultural relations the Maghrib has adopted during the last two century of Mediterranean history are rarely taken into consideration, despite the epoch-making effects they have produced on its societies as well as on maritime and desert networks.

Before the 18th century, the Mediterranean was not a single basin, but a system of connected basins, which was able, as such, to produce the parossism of connections detected by Nicholas Purcell as the real paradigm of the area.<sup>2</sup> Maghrib’s towns were gateways to the sea or gateways

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1 R. Kasaba, (1988). *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (New York: State University of New York).

2 N. Purcell, *The Boundless Sea of Unlikeness? On Defining the Mediterranean*. *Mediterranean*

to the desert, according to the locations of ports on the edges of the different kinds of sea: the sea of water or the sea of sand. The Maghrib was, namely, a strip of transit land: a land called “island” (*jazirat*, in Arabic), at the crossroad of the Mediterranean-Saharan networks of navigation routes. The sea of sand was a bigger Mediterranean, as viewed in a mirror: so, for many centuries, the Maghribi Island was conceived as a system of gateways both to South and North-East Mediterranean. From this Maghribi point of view, it becomes clear that the Mediterranean was not an enclosed basin of connections.<sup>3</sup>

When this ancient cycle of Saharan commerce started to decline, because of the growing role of the oceanic trade routes, particularly from the eighteenth century, the economy of the Maghrib Island collapsed, paving the way for a new Mediterranean system of connections, which was dominated by imperialist actors of the world trade.

Following the suggestion of the Research Project carried out at the University of Paris 8, we note that there is a well-known paradox (a constitutive ambiguity) in recurrent representations of the Mediterranean in history: either they focus on the unifying matrix’s aspect, mythical, bearer of civilization projects; or they put the emphasis on diversity, to reveal fractures seemingly insurmountable.<sup>4</sup> There is also a settled relationship that comes back between this matrix unifying aspects of the Mediterranean and the idea of “civilization”, that is generally chosen in order to express and represent this unifying appearance (as it is primarily shown in the field of mapping). A deep attention to this relationship is needed to come to grips with this paradox.

The definition of a civilization’s context has been a major tool in the social sciences and humanities, either for the interpretation of the past, either for the creation of a kind of “mythic morphology” of the Mediterranean. For centuries, we have looked at the world – and at the Mediterranean – as a sequence or coexistence of “centres” of civilization.<sup>5</sup> This is an outlook that has obviously overlooked the spaces that were not explainable in conformity with a consistent pattern, defined by a specific “centre” (i.e. only the sedentary ones).

This centre-outwards approach speaks to a general desire to account for the ‘big picture’, to embrace all imperial centres and peripheries in one framework [...] To appreciate the centrality of imperial margins, we must read imperial evidence against the grain of its knowledge hierarchies, which construe empire as being built only by high-level elites.

On peripheries, moreover, various imperial histories mingle in borderlands where spatial and temporal frontiers overlap. Military, political, institutional, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, social and economic frontiers move spatially and temporally at their own pace, so that empire cannot

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Historical Review 2003. 18; 2: pp. 9-29.

3 P.D. Curtin. (1984). *Cross-cultural trade in world history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

4 Labex Project: *Atlas des Bords Méditerranéens*, directed by Philippe Nys (proceedings in press).

5 A.M. Medici (2011). *Mediterraneo planetario*. In *Paesaggi della complessità: La trama delle cose: e gli intrecci tra natura e cultura*. R. Barbanti, L. Boi, M. Neve, eds. (Milano: Mimesis): pp. 351-393.

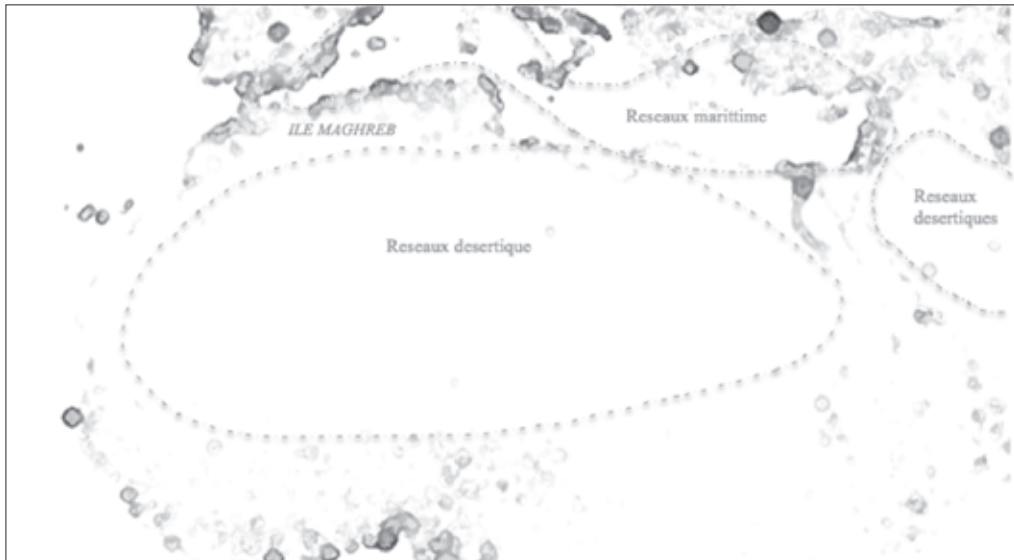


Fig. 1 - Before the 18th century, the Mediterranean was not a single basin, but a system of connected basins.

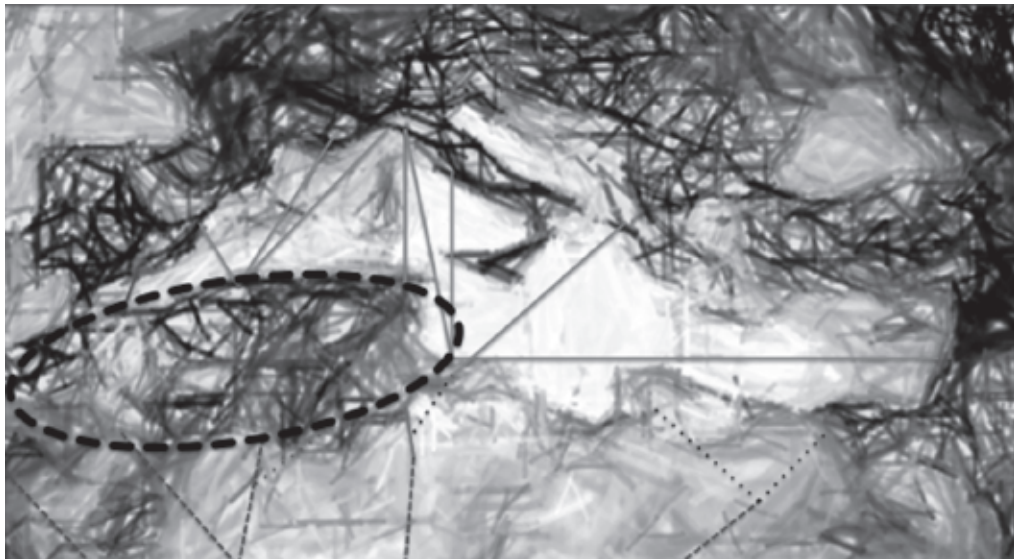


Fig. 2 - The Maghrib was, namely, a land called "Island" (jazirat, in Arabic).

be contained within definite parameters. In elite views from the apex of empire, each regime has its own place in space and time; but on the margins, empire typically includes contending, intermingled imperial histories, encoded in various languages.

Thus, in borderlands, ‘the language of power’ can be multiple, creolised and available only in translation or indirectly; archives are typically polyglot, dispersed, obscure and contradictory.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis of the Mediterranean system in history has long misunderstood the role of network which was shaped by Saharan nomads within the Mediterranean context. This is not merely an issue of hegemony in the narrative (nor is the claim to recognize – here – the place in history for a mistreated component of the Mediterranean civilizations, as they have been the Saharan nomads, or desert sailors).<sup>7</sup> Of course, this is true. But we have to admit that our analyses of the Mediterranean as a whole, as a system, may be completely misdirected if they are still formulated without awareness of the role played by the Saharan network in ancient and modern history (until the 18th century) and – moreover – if they are formulated without awareness of the complete transformation of all the Mediterranean networks since the end of the 17th century.

A relationship of domination, and thus of resistance, is at the heart of the idea of civilization and its coherence. It is not by chance that the Europeans are often unfamiliar with the myths and symbols of some Mediterranean peoples of Africa, for example the Amazigh peoples.

So, our choice is to focus on two strategic issues. The first is to analyse, in historical perspective, the changes of the Mediterranean as a whole (as a complex system), particularly because of the deep mutation that the Mediterranean has experienced in the contemporary era (namely in the 19th and 20th centuries). The second is to observe the fall of the Saharan networks from the perspective of one of the African edges of the Mediterranean, the Maghrib.

From an historical point of view, Maghribi perspective is a standpoint that has never been at the “centre” of a Mediterranean narrative; and which is usually perceived to be a peripheral perspective (even on the part of the Islamic historiography). The Maghribi historical perspective can instead open to us a very special pathway to the real core of the Mediterranean modernity; mainly because of its long tradition of nomadic-sedentary interrelation, which refers to the historical legacy of the transformative nature of global mobility.

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6 D. Ludden, *The Process of Empire: Frontiers and Borderlands*. In *Tributary Empires in Global History*, P.F. Bang, C.A. Bayly, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan): pp. 135-136.

See also p. 132: «The Western master-narrative of global modernity has further standardised historical thinking about empire by declaring it came to an end in the twentieth century. In the 1920s, the nation became the norm; after 1945, decolonisation covered the globe with national states. This transition became a pivot of history and empire became a thing of the past, archaic, over and done with, never to return».

7 T. Barfield, (2001). *Steppe Empires, China, and the Silk Route: Nomads as a Force in International Trade and Politics*. In *Nomads in the Sedentary World*. A.M. Khazanov, A. Wink, eds. (New York: Routledge): p. 234: «most of what could be considered ‘nomadic influence’ on sedentary societies historically involved the imposition of a certain number of the nomadic elite’s values, tastes, and styles of political organization on sedentary populations that then permeated the larger society».

As it has been remembered by Bang and Bayly (as editors of their *Tributary Empires in Global History*): nowadays, there is a remarkable tradition of scholarship proclaiming the Eurasian nomads as a major factor in the long-term development of the sedentary civilizations surrounding them (China, the Middle East, Russia).<sup>8</sup> This is also true for the Mediterranean, as one of the world systems of connections (of peoples, things, knowledge, practises) due to the role of Sahelian and Saharan peoples too. We fully share the Retaillé and Walther opinion: «Despite its peripheral location the Sahel case can contribute important insights to the re-conceptualisation of space and flows in the world».<sup>9</sup>

### *The sea in the mirror: The Maghribi insularity*

The fundamental nature of the Mediterranean is not the distinctive mark of some empire or civilization (that have shaped – and spread – their own experience of the Mediterranean); instead, it is the outcome of the different systems of connection that have produced all these empires and civilisations (by making possible the relation with other centres of civilization, and also the ceaseless reshaping of their codes).<sup>10</sup> If connectivity is the essence of the Mediterranean in history, we can better understand the increasing importance of this matter by analysing today “the rise and fall of a network system of connections”, rather than analysing just the rise and fall of sedentary empires (viewed from their own self-centred representations).

Before the last two centuries – namely, before the ages of steam navigation and aviation –, an absolutely major role was played by nomadic populations: i.e., with reference to the role of populations skilled at moving in large uninhabited areas, deserts, oceans, or arid areas.

Narratives of sedentary peoples have prevailed in shaping every cultural and economic achievement with their symbols, until the 20th century (or even beyond). The contribution of nomadic peoples was often underestimated or even obliterated. In the Mediterranean, there were various networks of connections that worked behind the rise of empires and civilisations of the past. Historical studies have consolidated a rigorous critique of these past readings and a global history approach has offered a solid analysis grid; yet, those contributions of historiography are still far from producing an urgent critical revision of false literary and identity myths built on past political narratives.

8 P.F. Bang, C.A. Bayly, eds. (2011). *Tributary Empires in Global History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

9 D. Retaillé, O. Walther (2012). *New Ways of Conceptualizing Space and Mobility: Lessons from the Sahel to the Globalized World (CEPS/INSTEAD, Working Paper, 24)*: p. 9.

10 P. Horden, N. Purcell (2000). *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell).

See also: I. Morris, *Mediterraneanization*. *Mediterranean Historical Review* 2003. 18; 2: pp. 30-55. C.A. Bayly (2004). *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell). B.D. Shaw, *A Peculiar Island: Maghrib and Mediterranean*. *Mediterranean Historical Review* 2003. 18; 2: pp. 93-125. N. Purcell, *The Boundless Sea of Unlikeness? On Defining the Mediterranean*. *Mediterranean Historical Review* 2003. 18; 2: pp. 9-29.

From the point of view of the transformation of the global connectivity in history there is not yet an epistemological critical mass, as it were, which is up to the contemporary challenges. On the other hand, we should be aware that any identitarian or civilization approaches are substantially inadequate to really explain the Mediterranean system of connections.

Maghrib territories are extremely varied, with high discontinuity, producing a strong cultural differentiation in a limited context. During the era of nomadic traders, many peoples, languages, ways of life cohabited in the Maghrib area. Seen from this perspective, the transcultural human process of continuous reshaping of ethnicities was extraordinary plain (as it was primarily observed by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddima*).<sup>11</sup> The long distance's system of connections of the Maghribi Island, between Mediterranean and Sahara, allowed the maintenance of this highly cosmopolitan society for centuries. As Nicholas Purcell said: «without connectivity, true diversification was not possible».<sup>12</sup>

However, from the point of view of classical representations of the African side of the Mediterranean, the Maghrib was showed as a *vacuum* of civilization. In the eyes of the imperial rulers – either Christian or Muslim ones – it regularly represented something mysterious or weird. The Maghrib was irreducible to the idea (and uniformity) of a “center”, even when it shared the Islamic faith with the center of “civilization”.

The Sahara was an inland sea; a sea of sand, mountains and rocks. It was indeed a Mediterranean in a mirror, a sea with its islands: the oasis. As related by Herbert Vivian in his nineteenth-century travel chronicle, speaking of the Sahara desert: «It has ports, islands, storms, pirates, loneliness, and almost every other characteristic of the sea».<sup>13</sup> From this point of view, the Mediterranean was a basin of interaction between two different kind of seas for European, African, and Asian peoples.

The territorial discontinuity represented by the Saharan desert was, therefore, a kind of reserved area of African peoples, because of the European limited access to practices and knowledge needed to cross the desert (and well kept by the peoples of the territory). In speaking about the Mediterranean network area, it's in the wider framework of this (specular, symmetrical) double sea (the Mediterranean and the Sahara) that we must consider all the reflections on “thalassology” and “thalassocracies”. This circumstance has created an unusual dialectic between the Maghrib and the rest of the Mediterranean. The effects of this insularity can be evidenced in typical recurring patterns which are found in its history. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, the role of the Sahara as long-distance network (and high mobility area) was in severe decline and the Maghrib was falling in a crisis of profound transformation.

Such decline takes a quite different sense if a sedentary or a nomadic standpoint is adopted.

11 Ibn Khaldun (1967-1968). Discours sur l'histoire universelle (al-Muqaddima). Intr. by Vincent Monteil (Beirut, 3 vols.).

12 N. Purcell, *The Boundless Sea*: p. 22.

13 H. Vivian (1899). *Tunisia and the Modern Barbary Pirates* (New York: Longmans, Green): pp. 258-259.

As remarked by Denis Retaillé and Olivier Walther:

despite an overwhelming number of studies on flows and networks, most of contemporary geography remains strongly influenced by a ‘sedentary’ vision of space in which mobility is primarily seen as movement between fixed locations.<sup>14</sup>

The authors’ approach is based, instead, on the primacy of movement in today’s changing organization of space. They refer to the Sahelian societies, on the Saharan borders, where the rise and fall of networks of commerce were part of the way of life of peoples. They define their work as a long study on the end of the nomadic societies, whose results have been reinvested in the study of globalization.<sup>15</sup>

### *Networks matter*

So, do the geographical limits of the modern Mediterranean really exist? And which are the borders of networks? What is the place of this Mediterranean within reflections on “new thalassology”<sup>16</sup> and “thalassocracies”?<sup>17</sup>

The advent of European imperialism in the Mediterranean in the 19th century has changed the sign of relationships between Europe and Northern Africa. At this time, the European imperialism was able to reap the benefits of the African crises caused by the transformation of the ancient regional networks of connections (and trade). How was changing the role of the Saharan shore-land at this time?

With the final sunset of the trans-Saharan travels and with the increasing effects of the technological advances in transport by sea or by air, the profitable trade of the Saharan networks had escaped from the local peoples’ control (and the revenues of this business, too).

A deconstruction of travel as historical metaphor of networks took place.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, by observing the Mediterranean as an historical object, we have summarized it as a system of networks. In this sense, the mutations of travel which result from the technological advancements along with the European imperialism’s legacies in world economy may explain the phenomenon of the so called “mediterraneanization of the world” in the contemporary era.<sup>19</sup> Connectivity (i.e. the capacity of connecting the centres, or nodes) is scattered almost everywhere, at least in terms of trade. New networks have redirected their flows mainly on

14 Retaillé and Walther, ‘New Ways’, p. 3.

15 Denis Retaillé, ‘L’espace nomade’, *Revue de Géographie de Lyon*, 1 (1998), 71-81.

16 Peregrine Horden, and Nicholas Purcell, ‘The Mediterranean and “the New Thalassology”’, *The American Historical Review*, 06 (2006), 111/3, 722-740.

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

18 Elmar Holenstein, *Philosophie-Atlas: Orte und Wege des Denkens* (Zürich: Ammann, 2004).

19 Morris, ‘Mediterraneanization’.

routes by sea or by air. The role of nomads in ruling the fragile land areas has collapsed. The historical change in the Mediterranean area (the fall of his old double sea system) is given to the fact that main connections are nowadays carried out outside of the shore-lands like the Saharan ones. Mastery of nomads on these networks – which was so long safe for their own ability to cross the deserts – was undermined: the trade was made feasible by others and through different routes.

The same thing happened to all the old deserted corridors of the Afro-Asian area, that were kept open by crossing the tropical deserts: so, not only in the Sahara African (or Great Desert), but also in its extensions beyond the Red Sea, which are the deserts of Arabia, Syria, Persia, Baluchistan and of the Indus. In these areas, nomadic way of life has become de facto obsolete in securing connections and assuring cultural mediation.

From a political point of view, this new situation has given rise to a slow process of territorialization of local institutions and finally rapid urbanization, in a context of increasing economic and environmental fragility in all these areas.

In terms of the legacy of globalization, we must pay attention to the fractures, inequalities, and forms of marginalisation that this new order has engendered in all these wastelands of the world (which were major network systems of the past). Ian Morris has spoken about a dialectic between “winners and losers” in relation to this Mediterraneanization in the contemporary global era.

### *Reshaping the way of travelling*

The Mediterranean connections of the era of nomadism were disassembled. The cultural mediation no longer takes place step by step along the travel, but it occurs abruptly; so giving the false perception that cultural differences are emphasized by globalization, while they are greatly reduced by it.

Nowadays, contemporary societies are supposed to be defined by hyper-mobility:<sup>20</sup> a fact that seems to find resonance with some laws of nomadism. In their study, Retaillé and Walther consider that

not only people, goods, capital or knowledge are currently more mobile, but that circulation also affects places themselves, which means that a given place can move from one location to another while keeping the same function within the spatial structure.<sup>21</sup>

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20 D. Retaillé, O. Walther (2012). *New Ways*: p. 24.

21 D. Retaillé, O. Walther (2012). *New Ways*: p. 9. See also: D. Retaillé. *La transformation des formes de la limite*. *Journal of Urban Research* 2011. 6: p. 19: «Quelle est la nature du lieu dans l'espace du mouvement? On sait comment la métaphore du nomadisme a envahi le monde hyper moderne, mais l'on sait moins comment fonctionne l'espace des nomades, relégué qu'il a été dans une préhistoire de



It is just right what happened in network deserts of North Africa. In this way, it is true that «the Sahel case can contribute important insights to the re-conceptualisation of space and flows in the world».<sup>22</sup> One of the most relevant teachings of Sahelian nomadism is the key role in the ability to control distance without trying to control surface.

The ability of Sahelian societies to control distance without trying to control surface is at odds with the territorial notion of states. The ongoing conflict between the two paradigms has resulted in the decline of historical nomadism and its mutation into other types of movement-based activities, such as tourism, cross-border trade, smuggling, and terrorism. This conflict also allowed highlighting that control of movement is power. While nomads' power rests on the possibility of being home anywhere without having to support the cost of looking after the space between the places, the power of states is built on the ability to control movement, and impose “areas” and “territories” of production and transhumance that disrupt the general circulation patterns of Sahelian populations.<sup>23</sup>

This, however, is really the preserve of an elite able to connect to global networks.<sup>24</sup> Such mobility, as “state of moving” overturns the idea of limit.<sup>25</sup> In these reorganizations of the Mediterranean space in a global context of networks there are no borders. Thus, both the idea of the city and of its porosity are particularly emphasized, as Benjamin and Lacis reported with reference to some distinctive traits of the Neapolitans.<sup>26</sup>

Above all, as also underlined by Ian Morris: we must be aware that the increasing connections always create “winners” and “losers”. The disappearance of the connections from some territories is amplifying the win or the defeat of the Mediterranean areas and their communities. This fact can alter dramatically a complex and fragmented area such as the Mediterranean.

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l'humanité».

22 D. Retaillé, O. Walther (2012). *New Ways*: p. 9.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

25 D. Retaillé. *La transformation des formes de la limite*: p. 5.

See also: M. Castells (1996). *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell).

26 E. Donaggio, ed. (2000). *Napoli (Napoli: L'ancora del Mediterraneo)*. W. Benjamin (2007). *Immagini di città*. Ed. by E. Ganni. Pref. by C. Magris. Aft. by Peter Szondi (Torino: Einaudi, rev. edn): pp. 3-16. L. Renzi. *Percezione e immagine della “Großstadt” in Walter Benjamin e Alfred Döblin. Dagli Städtebilder e i testi berlinesi a “Berlin Alexanderplatz”*. *Derekh Judaica Urbinatensia* 2002. I; 0: pp. 58-75. Faithful to a long tradition of geographers (especially German, two names will suffice: Georg Forster and Alexander von Humboldt), Benjamin's short portraits of cities are vivid and insightful urban views (*Ansichten*) showing at the same time the urbs and the civitas, stones and peoples mirroring each other (like in the renowned metaphor of Naples' porosity) in their inseparable and dynamic relationship: M. Neve (1999). *Virtus Loci. Lineamenti fondamentali di una teoria dell'informazione spaziale (Urbino: Quattroventi)*: pp. 173-174.

So, we can sustain that in the Mediterranean context there is a principal consequence of these changes, which perhaps sums up all the previous challenges: that is, the crisis of the so-called “fragile areas” (with the related social and environmental effects).

In a quite philosophical perspective, some legacies of the way of life of the so-called nomadic populations may prove to be really valuable for entirely accepting the Mediterranean challenges in the present and future times. Primarily, because the essence of globalization is mobility, while national States have no familiarity with the flexible solutions that mobility requires. Furthermore: because of the fragility of such areas, in terms of bio-sustainability of the environment and in terms of security (including, by first, the security and sustainability for the peoples living in these areas and for their needs).

By observing the system from the African edges of the Mediterranean sea, we can see that we are already facing a widespread crisis of these areas, as the Sahara desert, involving the Mediterranean system of connections.

A real and conscious assumption of responsibility is needed, to meet the social and environmental needs of the new Mediterranean. Otherwise, the historical advantages of the ancient Mediterranean (that were given mostly by the proximity of many of these network areas) might turn out into drawbacks: instability, conflicts, and the limitless domination of powerful peoples (being able to win resource conflicts), over the less powerful ones.

In such a spatial organization, both economic resources and political alliances result from the ability to establish social ties between places, rather than investing in productive activities in fixed locations. Long-distance trade is predominantly based on this principle, which supposes that traders maintain a large number of clientelist ties in various locations, so as to obtain and sell their products according to shifting demand and border differentials, whereas agricultural producers are much more dependent on specialized and non-mobile investments.<sup>27</sup>

While new forms of mobility are producing new spatial models of cultural diversification, the old Mediterranean model of connectivity is potentially replicable in many other contexts (by “turning on” a system of connections). In the contemporary global system, many world’s places are able to become network’s point, proposing themselves as new hubs for world trade and cultural connections (as “new Mediterraneans”). The grim irony here is that, after the fall of the Saharan-Mediterranean networks, it is the Mediterranean right likely to be the victim of the isotropy of nationalisms and resurgence of self-serving civilizations paradigms (with the sole aim to secure the rule of the hegemonic power of the moment, by generating a recurrence of conflicts over resources), up to abdicate to its legacy of master of cultural connections in favour of other “new Mediterraneans” in the world.

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27 D. Retaillé, O. Walther (2012). *New Ways*: p. 12.

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this essay is to look at the shape of the Mediterranean region by adding to the perspective handed down by Mediterranean sedentary civilisations the peculiar perspective of the peoples of Maghrib with their nomadic legacy. From this point of view, we could observe some new perspective shapes of the Mediterranean “Plaza”, of its edges and systems of connections: the Mediterranean sea was not a single basin, but a system of connected basins. Furthermore, by looking at the Mediterranean history from the southern edge of the sea, at the beginning of the contemporary era a deep change in the regional system of networks has occurred, as a result of the fall of Saharan nomadic networks. The Maghribi historical perspective can open to us a very special pathway to the comprehension of the Mediterranean modernity, mainly because of its long tradition of nomadic-sedentary interrelation. The epoch-making challenges inherited from the collapse of nomadism in the recent past could be a strategic issue to understand the transformative nature of global mobility.