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Egypt and the Concept of the Mediterranean

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These remarks began as a response to a pair of papers in the Columbia colloquium, those of Herzfeld and Armstrong, and they retain that character even as they take up ideas raised in other papers in this volume and reflect on the place of Egypt in *The Corrupting Sea* itself. Those two original papers have in common that they step back from the Mediterranean itself to those who create and represent it as a category, a concept, or a political fact. Although in neither case were scholars and teachers the group under consideration, it is evident that we ourselves are engaged in just this work of creation and representation. A number of other papers printed as chapters in this volume do raise related issues of inclusion and exclusion in the constituting of the Mediterranean as a subject of academic study and public perception, and already as I listened to them it became obvious to me that collectively they bore on an issue of perennial concern to me as an historian of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, namely, the place of that society in the contemporary Mediterranean world. It was, however, equally striking how slight a place in the conversation of the colloquium Egypt occupied, and this near-omission only reinforced that concern over Egypt's place in the larger Mediterranean conversation. This invisibility takes on an additional irony when one considers that if one thinks of a work other than Braudel's before Horden and Purcell for which the Mediterranean was the programmatic theme, it is unavoidably Goitein's great work, *A Mediterranean Society*. That study, as Abulafia's chapter points out, centres on a community in Egypt.

The colloquium thus embodied in a sense the ambivalence that Horden and Purcell's view of the Mediterranean exhibits towards Egypt. Although they never, as far as I have seen, do a

straightforward report card for the land of the Nile, it is not difficult to do an assessment. Of their two great tests for inclusion in their Mediterranean, Egypt fails that of fragmentation outright. Although it is not without variation, there are no major barriers to movement and no radical distinctions of environment within the valley of the Nile.[1] Indeed, it is precisely the twin characteristics of spatial unity and enclosure within a kind of environmental box that historians tend to point to as formative elements in the political geography of pharaonic Egypt.[2] For this reason it lacks the variation in crop yields, as Horden and Purcell note (*CS* 152: the lowest interannual variability). Although it had the wetlands of the Delta to help reduce the risk of crop failure (*CS* 188), they were hardly needed (nor, in case of a major failure of the Nile, sufficient) for that purpose.

Egypt does much better in connectivity, with the Nile never far from any settlement (cf. *CS* 140), although most of the country is distant from the central sea. The extensive traffic on the river, from nome to nome, could reasonably be seen as playing the part played by maritime cabotage in Horden and Purcell's Mediterranean. One might argue about Egypt's contribution to their emphasis on rural rather than urban economies. This is an area in which Egypt changed dramatically during the course of a millennium under Greek and Roman rule, particularly the latter, going from a land characterized by its villages to one of the most urbanized provinces of the Roman Empire.

Overall, Egypt's fit into the Horden and Purcell definition is thus fairly weak. Then again, the Mediterranean is, they say (p. 45), a fuzzy set. Egypt is part of the fuzzy edges. That fact perhaps accounts for the marginal role Egypt plays in the book, although it does not fully explain the fact that medieval Egypt—the Egypt of the Geniza documents—plays a far more important role than Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. Indeed, it is striking that the otherwise omnivorous bibliography of the book

[1] The degree of fragmentation emphasized by Horden and Purcell (*CS* 78) as making the Mediterranean distinctive is precisely what Egypt lacks.

[2] For a summary view of this 'caging effect,' see J. G. Manning, 'Irrigation et état en Égypte antique,' *Annales HSS* 57 (2002), 611–23 at 613.

has relatively little on Egypt from Alexander to the coming of the Arabs. Despite the authors' disclaimer of any apology 'for omission or *Tendenz*', the reader is entitled to ask why ancient Egypt is so much less a part of the Mediterranean than medieval.[3] It is hard to avoid the thought that Goitein's magisterial and convenient synthesis, rather than any qualities in Egypt itself, deserves the responsibility.

But first we will turn back to the political dimension of conceptualizing the Mediterranean. This could hardly be better exemplified than by Christopher Drew Armstrong's chapter, where the Mediterranean is shown to be brought into existence both as cartographic concept and representation and as theatre of economic and political influence by the will of successive French ministers, not only ahead of other nations in recognizing the possibilities but creating realities that other nations would then have to deal with. When travellers transform, as Armstrong describes it, the experience of travel from a means of collecting and exchanging into a dynamic model of visual perception, they are framing a usable Mediterranean.

Similarly, but from a very different vantage point, Herzfeld points to the ways in which a supposed toolkit of Mediterranean characteristics can be used as part of rhetorical strategies aimed at defining one's own position in an advantageous fashion and at putting others in their (inferior) place. He shows that the political dimensions of this sort of action extend from the use of such concepts inside societies of the Mediterranean to the academic study of the societies in question and are there rooted in the self-interest of the academics who delineate differences or form alliances with the help of conceptions of what is or is not Mediterranean. The most obvious difference, one might say, is that his examples of Mediterranean stereotyping in Greece and Italy embody negative qualities, however differently they may be used in different national or regional contexts. In scholarship, by contrast, 'Mediterranean' has nothing but good resonances, those that have led to the little bandwagon of journal titles featuring the region that Susan Alcock's paper analyses.

[3] This is not just a matter of bibliography, but of substance—for example, the failure (*CS* 211) to recognize the enduring importance of sesame oil in Egypt.

In a number of settings, to be sure, 'Mediterranean' is little more than our imposition of a proxy for another term—perhaps 'Greek' or 'Roman' or 'Byzantine,' in some academic contexts, the 'in the Mediterranean' rather than 'of the Mediterranean' in Horden and Purcell's taxonomy.

It is impossible to comment adequately on the academic political dimension of the Mediterranean concept without at least some disclosure of interests, for those interests exist as much in our academic politics as in the discourse of the Mediterranean societies that Herzfeld discusses. I come to this topic from a particular perspective and background: on the one hand, a training in Greek and Roman history in an era when that field was not much interested in examining the personal or conceptual baggage brought by the historian to the task at hand; on the other, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes, a career-long focus on Egypt, a country that has, as we have already seen from the most cursory of looks at *The Corrupting Sea*, always occupied a rather peculiar position from the point of view of the Mediterranean, particularly in the central periods of Greek and Roman history. It is, however, precisely the combination of these two things that leads me to find a number of the chapters in this volume so suggestive. They require some reflections about both Antiquity and contemporary academe.

Most Classical historians have found it difficult to think of Egypt as being part of their subject at all. I shall never forget being asked, when a graduate student at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, what business I had being there when I was working on the Ptolemaic empire. The simple and non-confrontational answer, of course (which, believe it or not, was the one I chose), was that the Ptolemaic empire had included parts of Greece (particularly the Aegean islands) and Asia Minor, and that Ptolemy II's troops operated in Attica in the 260s BC. But the larger and more ideological one was that I thought of Ptolemaic Egypt and its dependencies as part of the larger Greek world of the Hellenistic period. This was a viewpoint I had absorbed at a Yale still strongly coloured by the tradition of Michael Rostovtzeff. My questioner thought otherwise, and lest anyone think that he represented some lunatic fringe, I observe that he subsequently occupied one of the most elevated academic positions in the American School in Athens

itself. Ptolemaic history did not and does not count as Greek history to many minds.

The obvious alternative to treating Ptolemaic history as Greek history would be to think of it as part of the history of Egypt—as, of course, it is to a large extent. There are two problems with locating it only in Egyptology. For one, Egyptology, in contrast to—or perhaps all too much like—the classical view, tends to think of the Hellenistic and Roman periods of Egyptian history as alien ground, too Mediterranean, post-pharaonic. Perhaps more importantly from the point of view of academic interest, because there are (despite very wide and strong public interest) few departments of Egyptology in North America and comparatively far more teaching Classics and Greek and Roman history, it is in my interests and those of people like me to see Egypt as part of the Mediterranean world run by the Greeks and Romans. And indeed, almost everyone in this country who does the sort of thing I do is housed in Classics, History, or both, and there are probably more people interested in Roman Egypt in Religion departments than in Egyptology or Near Eastern Studies.

Near Eastern Studies, for that matter, has never seemed like a plausible alternative, either. Egyptology is located in Near Eastern departments in some universities, but Egypt's relationship with the idea of the Near East is almost as difficult as its connection to the Mediterranean. (It is, incidentally, striking that a volume on the early Roman East edited by Susan Alcock omits Egypt entirely.[4]) The absence of Arabic from journals about the Mediterranean, to which Alcock has called attention (along with the underrepresentation of Islamic topics) fits well with the interests of a disciplinary organization of the sort I have described. Ignorance of Arabic is of course utterly dysfunctional for any kind of fieldwork, and it is no accident that American scholars trained in a classical tradition have played a minor role in archaeological fieldwork in Egypt, especially since the Second World War. The most famous American papyrologist of the twentieth century, Herbert Youtie, famously never

[4] S. E. Alcock (ed.), *The Early Roman Empire in the East*, Oxbow Monograph 95 (Oxford, 1997).

visited Egypt. The actual country is thus left to the Egyptologists and Arabists.

Now there is some connection between ancient realities and modern academic politics. Egypt was, and depicted itself as, a rather ethnocentric civilization, with relatively poor communications by sea to the north, a difficult corridor to the south, and deserts elsewhere. (However much Abulafia's metaphorical use of deserts as seas may be of use elsewhere, the Egyptian deserts certainly do not function in that kind of spatially mediating fashion.) It was not actually as isolated as that description would suggest, but its own self-representation is neither African, nor Asian, nor Mediterranean. Nor has Egyptology ever been at home with these fields, not really even, as I have remarked, with Near Eastern Studies. And yet at least from the middle of the second millennium BC Egypt was in fact deeply engaged beyond its borders, as Marc Van De Mieroop's chapter in this volume describes, and in the first millennium it was seriatim under the domination of powers from Africa south of the first cataract, from Asia, and finally from the Aegean. Moreover, at least as early as the same period, and probably earlier, there was a substantial flow of outsiders settling in Egypt and becoming part of the Egyptian population; dozens of languages were spoken. Picking an academic home for a diachronic Egyptology, in other words, means choosing one region against the others, not a question of fact but one of preference. The political value of an African instead of Mediterranean or Near Eastern Egypt has not escaped notice in recent decades.[5]

As I have suggested, geographical realities have some role in Egypt's ambiguous connection to the Mediterranean. And yet, as Van De Mieroop points out, the Near East formed a political unit in the late second millennium BC, one in which the Mediterranean was one, but only one, of the sources of internal communication. He suggests that this unity came to an end at the end of the second millennium, with the Mediterranean

[5] See the judicious review by Stanley M. Burstein, 'A Contested History: Egypt, Greece and Afrocentrism', in S. M. Burstein, R. MacMullen, K. A. Raaflaub, and A. M. Ward, *Current Issues and the Study of Ancient History*, Publications of the Association of Ancient Historians 7 (Claremont, Calif., 2002) 9–30.

looking more westward and no longer serving as a unifier for the Near East. Perhaps this was true for a time, but it seems to me that the description he gives of the second millennium could equally well apply to the Persian empire. Certainly it fits later periods. The confrontation of Hellenistic monarchies took place in an important sense around the eastern Mediterranean, with some westward entanglements that grew gradually more imperative as Rome became a central actor; but that eastern Mediterranean world reached far into the Asian continent, with Seleucid power extending deep into what had been the Persian central provinces.[6] Compared to many of these regions, as I have observed, Egypt had a distinct advantage in connectivity, for the Nile brought almost all of its populated hinterland into relatively swift and inexpensive contact with the sea. In the economic sense of Alain Bresson's discussion, Egypt should be the most Mediterranean of countries.

Even in modern Egyptian politics, Mediterranean or not Mediterranean has not been an easy question. For Nasser, there seemed to be advantages in emphasizing pan-Arabism; for others, pointing to Egyptian's historic engagement in the Mediterranean was a means of suggesting that the Arab world was not the natural source of Egyptian identity or contemporary political alliances. Matters are thus practically inverted from the usage that Herzfeld describes in Italy or Greece. Instead of the Mediterranean's serving as a code to explain or justify negative behavioural stereotypes, it has at times served in Egypt the reverse purpose, that of criticizing corruption, nepotism, unreliability, imprecision, and other undesirable stereotyped behaviours as *not* being Mediterranean. In this context, 'Mediterranean' perhaps is the plausible substitute for 'European'. In any event, the often marginal place not only of Greek and Roman studies but of investigation of the millennium from Alexander to Amr in Egypt's universities, and the subsuming of Greek and Roman Egypt under Pharaonic in the Egyptian government's administrative structures for archaeology, show how difficult affirming a Mediterranean identity has been in

[6] In this instance, it should be noted, the term 'upper' (*ano*) for the satrapies east of Babylonia certainly cannot depend on the north–south axis that Bowersock postulates.

post-independence Egypt. The national narrative skips from Pharaonic to Islamic Egypt.[7] As Herzfeld says, 'the history of even the most distant Mediterranean pasts is always already politicized.'

Everywhere we turn, then, we find that Egypt's relationship to the idea of the Mediterranean is fraught with interests, and there are more that could be mentioned. Whether this means that there is nothing but interests, politics, and representation, however, is not so clear, and this is where I would say that I do not think that the question as posed by Herzfeld is the *only* Mediterranean question on which it is worth spending energy.

In the end, I am not sure that the heuristic power that he grants the category and its utility as an analytic tool about which he is more reserved are really such different things. I shall briefly give two examples in which the two seem to me to meet. The question of whether Egypt is to be considered a real and ordinary part of the Graeco-Roman world—its normality or exceptionality—has long been a staple of debate in my field, even the stated focus of international congresses. The last third of a century has driven scholarly consensus sharply in the direction of Egypt's 'normality' and away from its exoticization. There are undoubtedly several reasons for this trend, but one at least is independent of the desires and interests of papyrologists and their friends: the discovery of documents similar to the papyri of Egypt in contexts as distant from one another as southern Jordan (Petra) and northern England (Vindolanda). These have shown that much once regarded as exceptional in Egypt, be it in law, language, documentation practices, economy, or administration, is in fact paralleled elsewhere. This convergence seems to me more marked in the Roman period than in the Hellenistic. Our evidence for the Hellenistic period, however, is not so abundant as later, and even in the Hellenistic period I am prepared to argue that such essential social technologies as the uses of written documents and archives were essentially common across broad expanses.

[7] This is perhaps changing in interesting ways. An Egyptian friend in Byzantine history reported a prolonged—and to an outsider's eye, curious—territorial confrontation with a colleague in Graeco-Roman Egypt over which of them was entitled to teach late Antique Egypt.

One use of a concept of the Mediterranean, then, might be to look at the degree to which Egypt was or was not converging with it—to see that land's participation as something changing over time. At the least, this can help us escape the grip of the sort of unhistorical thinking that has produced any number of variations on *Égypte éternelle*. In fact, however, I think the reality is still more complicated. Part of Egypt's typicality, I believe, is that every other part of the basin was also, like Egypt, becoming less exceptional and more convergent during the same period, that extending from the fourth century BC down to the fourth AD, much as had been the case in the imperial world of what Van De Mieroop calls Early Antiquity.

A second such inquiry is to ask if the category Egypt always makes sense. Were Thebes and the western oases Mediterranean in the same degree that Memphis was? Are we just swallowing too easily the unitary concept of Egypt promulgated by the early kings in their own political self-interest and accepted so readily and uncritically by scholars until quite recently? Can the Mediterranean thus serve as a device to criticize assumptions internal to the study of Egypt, such as the desirability of political unification? I am not sure that the answer is positive; one could as well think that the reverse might happen. But Armstrong's depiction of the dynasty of the families of Colbert and de Maurepas in the ministry of maritime affairs strikes me as relevant here. It is only a moderate exaggeration, I would suggest, to say that France is as much, and as little, a Mediterranean country as Egypt is. If we were to fix our gaze on Egypt in the reign of Ptolemy II, that most thalassocratic of Hellenistic kings, it would not seem less Mediterranean-oriented than Colbertian France. In both cases, conscious choices to focus attention and resources on the Mediterranean were made. These regimes have often been compared in other respects, such as economic *dirigisme*, as well, something that commands less assent now than sixty years ago. For both, in any case, the Mediterranean was a choice made in pursuit of goals. In this sense, perhaps my ingrained desire to remain anchored in a historical study *not* limited to the analysis of interests and representations connects in such settings with Michael Herzfeld's desired agenda.