The Mediterranean City-World

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It is a shared notion in historical literature that, across the centuries, the Mediterranean has supported a myriad of commercial and cultural fluxes among lands juxtaposed by open warfare or low intensity conflicts. The geography of the Mediterranean basin is formed by lines of towns that in certain cases might share more similarities with the ones sitting on the opposite shore rather than with their own hinterlands. The collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century entails a vast process of abandonment of the cities described by Aldo Rossi as a movement of the seats of territorial power to the hilltops. (Rossi 1980) Focusing on the renovated urban rise that starts as early as the ninth century to flourish in the Late Middle Ages, David Abulafia has described this territorial regime as one of inhabited edges opposed by conflicts but connected by fluxes bearing on mercantile feverishness. The lands of Islam on the southern and western shores span from Cordoba, Valencia, Tunis, Palermo, Mazara, Alexandria, to Cairo. The Christendom extends over the Ligurian and Tyrrhenian Seas from Barcelona, Montpellier, Marseille, Genoa, Pisa, Naples, to Amalfi. The Byzantine dominion extends over the Adriatic and Aegean areas from Venice, Corfu, Thessalonica, Athens, Constantinople, Antioch, to Cyprus. The permanently contended strongholds of the Crusaders' states like Tyre, Sidon, Acre, Jaffa, and Jerusalem, conform the Levant. With a compact formulation, Hashim Sarkis has described Abulafia's model of the Mediterranean as a "geography of opposed but accessible shores", that is edges consisting of dotted lines of cities and towns "loosely connected with their [domestic] hinterland" while strongly linked to the opposite, stranger, and often conflictual, shore via trading routes. (Sarkis 2011)

Abulafia develops this Mediterranean paradigm of the 'opposed but accessible shores' in his monumental book *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediter-ranean*. After the shattering of the political and commercial unity of the *mare nostrum* achieved in antiquity by the Roman Empire, "some historians observe decline at the same moments as others detect expansion" in a 'painfully slow' process of re-integration of the Mediterranean as early as the ninth and tenth century. (Abulafia 2011) Even acknowledging the 'resilience' of the 'Byzantine East' and the basic continuity of the Islamic lands stretching from Syria to Portugal, the Mediterranean ranges "enormous regional variation" well beyond the 'puzzle' of the Christian West. (Abulafia 2011) What Abulafia describes as the 'Third Mediterranean' could be regarded as the process of formation of the urban Mediterranean, precipitating in particular between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries.

Abulafia's paradigm of the 'opposed but accessible shores' relies on the recon-struction of the voyages across political boundaries in the Mediterranean, undertaken in the second half of the eleventh century by Jewish rabbi Benjamin of Tudela and Muslim high-ranking bureaucrat Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn
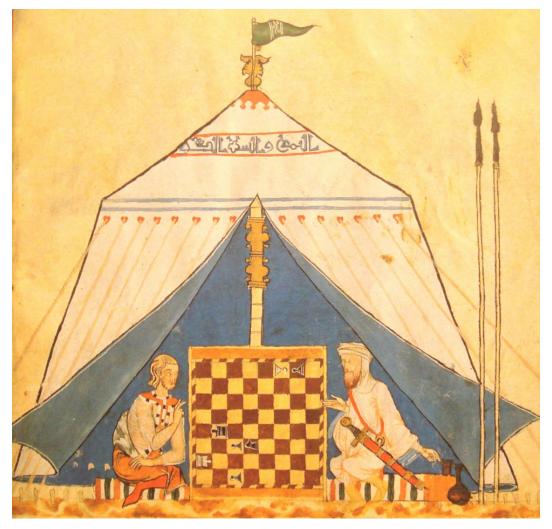
Fig1 / Christian And Muslim Playing Chess from Libro de los juegos, Alfonso X el sabio, 1251-83 circa, fol. 64R (Chess Problema n. 89
source / ChristianAndMuslimPlayingChess, by unknown author - commons.wikimedia.org

Jubayr, respectively from Navarre to Jerusalem and from Granada to Mecca.

Benjamin courses the Christian lands of eastern Iberia down to Barcelona, reaches the lands of the Franks at Marseilles and from there by boat arrives in Genoa. He proceeds from there overland visiting Rome on his way to Norman Bari. Through Corfu, he then leaves Christendom to start his march, overland again, across the Byzantine dominion towards Constantinople. Over Cyprus, again he crosses the crusaders kingdom in the Levant before reaching the holy city of Jerusalem. He fancies a further trip to explore Mesopotamia, whose descriptions might be product of fantasy. Southwards from there, crossing into the Muslim sphere, he reaches Alexandria. From Alexandria, he can easily embark for his return journey home via Sicily. Noting down commentaries about the places and peoples encountered, the Jewish traveler Benjamin offhandedly passes from Christendom to Byzantine Empire, from Constantinople to the Christian Levant, to just smoothly cross over to Islam and then sail back to the Christian West again, over the waves of the Mediterranean.

The voyage of Ibn Jubayr is instead troubled by a series of accidents culminating in a shipwreck off the port of Messina during the wintry return lag. However, his tribulations are those of the uncertain logistics and mobility of the time, while his crossings over the Christian-Muslim divide occur with ease. His narration of the events following Saladin's siege of the Christian stronghold of Kerak in 1183, however, renders a plastic representation of the ambivalent relations crossing the lands of a difficult coexistence of cultures in friction.

In fact, once informed of the siege at Kerak, the Christians gather a joint army from all their possessions in the Levant to march decidedly upon Saladin. Aware of the movements of the Christians, the Muslim leader seizes the opportunity to run incursions upon their unguarded lands, cities and villages. He captures prisoners "beyond number" among the Christians and certain sects of Jews, of whom "large numbers were put to a speedy death". Not only plunder beyond

any possible estimate, including "all the goods, provisions, baggage, furnitures, cattle and horses", is acquired by the Muslims, but the fury of Saladin's ordeal "erased all traces of the Frankish lands through which it passed". A stop-over in Damascus is meant to restore the troops before returning to set siege upon Kerak. Not without irony, Ibn Jubayr concludes:

"We ourselves went forth to Frankish lands at a time when Frankish prisoners were entering Muslim lands. Let this be evidence enough of the temperateness of the policy of Saladin." (Jubayr 1952, p. 314)

By 'temperateness' of Saladin, he is probably alluding to the commercial channels remaining open despite the merciless military conflict.

Further ahead in their travel, halfway on the road from Damascus to Banyas, the merchants encounter a large oak, called 'The Tree of Measure', which is said to mark "the boundary […] between security and danger". Groups of Christian brigands that set ambushes in the area, in fact, faithfully observe a singular convention:

"He whom they seize on the Muslim side, be it by the length of the arms or a span, they capture; but he whom they seize on the Frankish side at a like distance, they release." (Jubayr 1952, p. 315)

Jubayr's clear comprehension of the territorial regime governing the coexistence of opposed but interfaced communities is recorded in his 'Notes on the city of Banyas':

"This, city is on the frontier of the Muslim territories. It is small, but has a fortress below the walls of which winds a river that flows out from one of the gates of the city. A canal leading from it turns the mills. The city had been in the hands of the Franks, but Nur al-Din […] recovered it [in 1165]; It has a wide tillage in a contiguous vale. It is commanded by a fortress of the Franks called Hunin three parasangs distant from Banyas. The cultivation of the vale is divided between the Franks and the Muslims, and in it there is a boundary known as 'The Boundary of Dividing'. They apportion the crops equally, and their animals are mingled together, yet no wrong takes place between them, because of it." (Jubayr 1952, p. 315)

Further on, despite the conventional religious furor with which Ibn Jubayr introduces his notes on any town under Christian rule, "may God destroy it", his description of the 'civil and respectful' search on the Muslim travelers at the Christian customs at Acre stands in sharp contrast with the 'harsh and unfair' treatment re-ceived by them from the Muslim officers in Alexandria.

"[On] the 18th of September, we came to the city of Acre […]. We were taken to the custom-house, which is a khan prepared to accommodate the caravan. Before the door are stone benches, spread with carpets, where are the Christian clerks of the Customs with their ebony ink-stand ornamented with gold. They write Arabic, which they also speak. […] The merchants deposited their baggage there and lodged in an upper storey. The baggage of any who had no merchandise was also examined […], after which the owner was permitted to go his way and seek lodging where he would. All this was done with civility and respect, without harshness and unfairness. We lodged beside the sea in a house which we rented from a Christian woman." (Jubayr 1952, pp. 317-8)

On the other hand, despite the conventional wish reserved to the Lighthouse of Alexandria, "may God not let it cease to be an affirmation of Islam", the abuses and extorsions at the crossing of the customs are registered with no reticence.

"The day of our landing [in Alexandria], one of the first things we saw was the coming on board of the agents of the Sultan to record all that had been brought in the ship. […] Each was questioned as to what merchandise or money he had, that he might pay zakat […]. Most of them were on their way to discharge a religious duty and had nothing but the (bare) provisions for the journey. But they were compelled to pay the zakat […] The Customs was packed to choking. All their goods, great and small, were searched and confusedly thrown together, while hands were thrust into their waistbands in search of what might be within. […] During all this, because of the confusion of hands and the excessive throng, many possessions disappeared. After this scene of abasement and shame […] [the pilgrims] were allowed to go." (Jubayr 1952, pp. 31-2)

As for other travelers of the time, Ibn Jubayr's diary records the incessant commercial convergence of the ethnic groups of the Mediterranean mosaic, mainly Jews, Christians, and Muslims, in the teeming ports of the Mediterranean. This convergence corresponds to the process of grounding of the renovated spatial identity of the edge of the maritime basin. Ibn Jubayr's descriptions of the port cities of Alexandria (Jubayr 1952, p. 32), Acre (Jubayr 1952, p. 318), and Messina, with their crowds of diverse origins and their immense traffics, resonate in one another from different shores of the Mediterranean. Both filthy and luxurious,

these cities are teeming day and night with 'foreign manners and languages' and therefore associated to the ideal model of Constantinople (Jubayr 1952, p. 318), which Ibn Jubayr would never visit. About Messina he writes:

"This city is the mart of the merchant infidels, the focus of ships from the world over [...]. It is full of smells and filth [...]. Its markets are animated and teeming, and it has ample commodities to ensure a luxurious life. Your days and nights in this town you will pass in full security, even though your countenance, your manners and your tongue are strange." (Jubayr 1952, p. 338)

A special mention is dedicated to Alexandria's cultural facilities, capable to recollect scholars from all over the known world, provided with room and board to conduct their studies and bibliographic researches.

"Amongst the glories of this city, and owing in truth to the Sultan, are the colleges and hostels erected there for students and pious men from other lands. There each may find lodging where he might retreat, and a tutor to teach him the branch of learning he desires, and an allowance to cover all his needs." (Jubayr 1952, p. 33)

On the other hand, Benjamin's descriptions of the Mediterranean seaports are certainly more laconic, as his travelogue less poetic, but more numerous. Other than recording a detailed census of the Jewish communities around the Mediterranean, Bejamin's articulation of the ethnic diversity of the crowds in the port cities is detailed:

"Barcelona es una ciudad pequeña y hermosa [...] A ella acuden con mercancías, comerciantes de todas partes: de Grecia, Pisa, Génova, Sicilia, Alejandría de Egipto, Tierra Santa, Africa y de todos sus aledaños." (Benjamin 1918, p. 52)

"La ciudad de Constantinopla [...] está asentada a la orilla de dos golfos [...]. Allá van todos los mercaderes de Babilonia y en general de todo el país de Mesopotamia, de Media y Persia y del reino de Egipto entero, de la tierra de Canaán, o sea Rusia, Hungría, Patzinakia, Kazaria, Lombardía y España. Es ciudad de gran bullicio, porqué en ella acuden con mercancías de todos los países de mar y tierra." (Benjamin 1918, pp. 62-3)

The summit of the Mediterranean's commercial and cultural feverishness is without doubt Alexandria:

"Es este país de comercio, frecuentado por gentes de todos los pueblos y de todos los dominios cristianos. Acuden allí por una

parte: de las tierras de Venecia, Lombardía, Toscana, Apulia, Amalfi, Sicilia, Calabria, Romaña, Cazaria, Patzinakia, Hungría, Bulgaria, Racuvia, Croacia, Esclavonia, Rusia, Alemania, Sajonia, Dinamarca, Curlandia, Islandia, Noruega, Frisia, Escocia, Inglaterra, Gales, Flandes, Hainault, Normandía, Francia, Poitou, Anjou, Borgoña, Moriana, Provenza, Génova, Pisa, Gascuña, Aragón y Navarra. De la parte de poniente, donde dominan los mahometanos, los hay de Al-Andalus, Al Garbe, Africa y Arabia, y de la parte de la India, Savila, Abisinia, Libia, el Yemen, Babilonia, Siria, Grecia, cuyos habitantes son llamados "gregos", y turcos. Traen allí mercancías de la India, toda clase de aromas, que compran los mercaderes cristianos. Es ciudad de inmenso trafico de comercio, poseyendo cada nación su propia posada." (Benjamin 1918, pp. 113-5)

As I have argued more in detail in 'The Geographic Prospects of Human Habitat and the Attributes of a Novel Urbanity' (Pasini 2019), what Abulafia instantiates by suggesting to intersect the routes of merchants to understand the Mediterranean, is, thus, a process of formation of a geographic region indissolubly rooted deep in the urban paradigm, despite different regimes, religions, and magnitudes, which so drastically impacts the way in which one sees the surrounding world still today.

In 'The World According to Architecture: Beyond Cosmopolis', Hashim Sarkis has discussed the recent centrality of the geographic character in the design practice. (Sarkis 2011) While addressing the debate on the region-forming process of the geographic scale, Sarkis' essay centers on the concept of 'city-world' defined as the specular antipode to the 'world city' produced by globalization.

Sarkis certainly refers to the idea of the globalized world city, 'cosmopolis', articulated in Edward Soja's theory of the 'postmetropolis' (Soja 2000). In the second of his 'six discourses on the postmetropolis', 'cosmopolis' is regarded as the product of the globalization of the city space, which Sarkis calls the 'world city'. Soja uses Deleuze-Guattarian deterritorialization-and-reterritorialization dialectics to interpret the spatial structure as a grounding of sociopolitical regimes governing a region and, eventually, Soja's spatial geography is the result of an anthropological discourse. In Sarkis' essay, the 'city-world' corresponds instead to the alternative aspiration to "think the world as one architectural entity", or "the

capacity to understand and map the living environment".

If the world city is the result of the normalizing modernist model of the International Style, consolidated by the centralizing postmodernist models, the city-world lineage is tracked back to *neo-avantgarde* prefigurations such as Gottman's megalopolis, Doxiadis' Ecumenopolis, Friedman's Ville Spatiale, Fuller's world-mapping geoscopes, the situationist Unitary Urbanism, and Nieuwenhuis' New Babylon. In Sarkis' thesis, the city-world reaches its fully radical unfolding in Superstudio's Supersurface. Opposed to the world city or cosmopolis or metropolis, the city-world recovers "the project of being in the world from the suffocating impositions of globalization" and turns the 'sameness in the world' from 'a sign of poverty of form' to 'an untapped richness' of inspiration. The city-world in fact unfolds a 'discourse on cosmopolitanism' in which 'the subject' is a 'positively nomadic stranger' with world-making powers and the world, by consequence, becomes 'the scope of individual imagination'. (Sarkis 2011)

We could argue that the process of formation of the Mediterranean region based on the urban paradigm, surfacing through the intertwining voyages of Ibn Jubayr and Benjamin de Tudela, represents a geographic modality of space production diametrically opposed to that of globalization. In the face of the expanding globalization of the world city, this urban-based region-forming model offers a radical alternative for the exploration of the geographic scale of contemporary design.

The discipline of modern geography, risen from the age of "discovery and colonization" with the aspiration to be the synthesis between "the physical, the economic, and the social", has instead disintegrated into a multiplicity of sectorial disciplines". (Sarkis 2011) Therefore, not by chance, according to Sarkis, designers are called now to engage with broader contexts addressing "infrastructures, urban systems, rural and regional questions" and today's formal pursuits are dominated by an aspiration to an all-unifying "geographic aesthetic".

The contemporary recovery of the broader natural context is well expressed by Josep Lluís Mateo:

"whereas in the recent past the paradigm by which architecture was measured was the city, now, the collective reference surrounding our design activity is the relation to nature. [...] After Rossi and Koolhaas, a manifestation of the operational impracticability of nostalgia and delirium, the city appears as a second nature". (Mateo and Sauter 2014)

However, the 'city-world vs. cosmopolis' binary should be interpreted as dialectics rather than alterity. Despite nominal juxtapositions, no sharp separation stands between the idea of the city that becomes global and the idea of the world that become one city, as the processes that generate the latter imply symmetrical processes that generate the former.

The core of the question is the idea of a globalized cityscape, cosmopolis, that contains a city-world beyond cosmopolis and *vice versa*. As of 'Theorem Five to Theorem Seven', "deterritorialization is always double, [exhibiting] a deterritorializing force and a de-territorialized force" with the relative roles of "expression" and "content"—we can identify here the 'deterritorialized force' with a 'recessive force of reterritorialization'. (Deluze and Guattari 1987) Equally, the dynamics of deterritorialization (city-world) and reterritorialization (world city) are never exclusive, but always reciprocal and simultaneous, characterized only by the prevalence of one or the other force.

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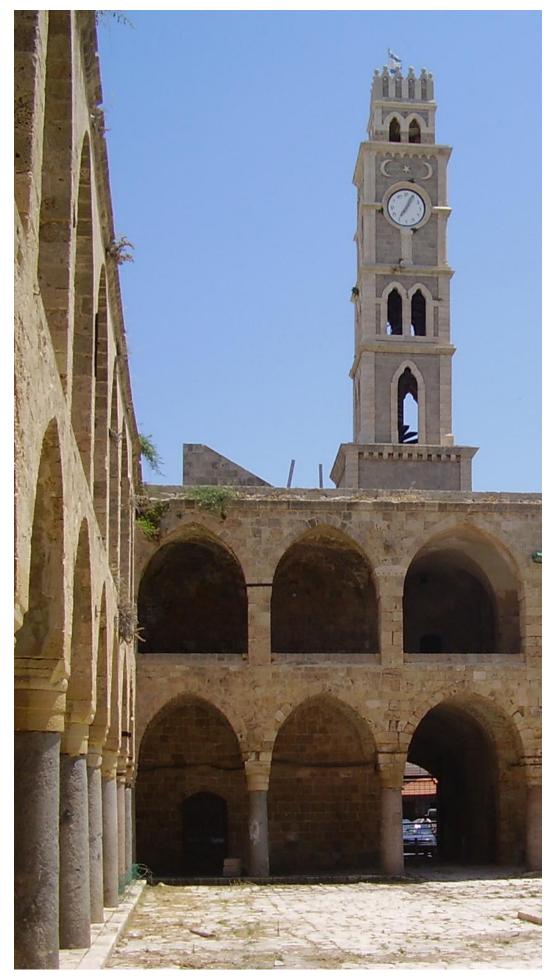
Fig. 2 / The Ottoman Al-Umdan khan, Acre. Just like the two-story customs house of the Kingdom of Jerusalem described by Jubayr, whose site it rises upon, the kahn provided warehouse spaces at the ground floor and a hostel for the lodging of the incoming merchants at the upper floor.
source / PikiWiki Israel 13560 Khan Al Umdan in Acre", modified by the author - commons.wikimedia.org