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OMB / the Observatory of Mediterranean Basin

The new unit of Applied Research Department - POLIS University

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18

The objective of this unit is the creation of a new research dedicated to the Observatory of the Mediterranean Basin (OMB), a possible niche in the market and within the focus of the Department of Applied Research at POLIS University.

Starting from the Balkan regions, the interest will be extended to all the cities that overlook the Mediterranean. In this frame of work, the observatory intends to highlight several topics that the Balkan regions and Mediterranean cities have in common, considering all the aspects dealing with the issue of land and water.

The main idea is to define a strategic network in the crossway of multiple activities and interests in which Mediterranean Cities can be observed as crossing points of different identities. We can adopt the term multimodality to define a complex condition in which the Mediterranean basin has always lived, a mix of knowledge and heritage that through time and history gave birth to human civilizations. Part of the scope of this unit will be the idea of making the Albanian nation more operative within an already existing network facing the Mediterranean basin¹.

Regarding the two above-mentioned aspects: In terms of land domain, the role of informal cities must be seen as an opportunity to elaborate new ways of alternative planning and urban design processes, taking into consideration all the activities that grant importance to this geographic area. The aforementioned statement can be associated with the concepts of multimodality in terms of the opportunity to find multiple ways to

explore the new post-process cities in the Balkan regions. In other words, this argument can be seen as an opportunity to investigate the issue of different identities belonging to the Mediterranean basin. The topic of post-process cities can be analyzed and studied like a new phenomenon and added to the actual debate of the Mediterranean basin. The contribution can be seen as a new trend, traceable in some cities of Eastern Europe, reconfigured by a particular attitude toward urban disorders. This new model has started a new interest in the city processes that generate new landscapes made by society, tradition and heritage.

In terms of water domain, the Albanian coastline must be explored as a natural stripe of a varied landscape and richness, flora and fauna of Mediterranean typologies. The marine resources along with the villages facing the sea, are considerable primary values for the research of a new characterization of Albania's landscape. In many cases the sea has the potentiality to become a tourist as well as an economical resource. In a more strategic manner, the water issue must be seen as a primary resource for future research and investigation in the Albanian coastline.

Geography of the Mediterranean cities

The meaning and importance of the Mediterranean from a geographical point of view is easily understandable by analyzing the etymology of the word - mediterraneus: terre di mezzo (middle land), that can also be seen as a big threshold in which the water realm has



Fig1 / Mediterranean Map
source / internet edited by Loris Rossi

simultaneously favored and stimulated communication and limits throughout history. Looking at the maps, the big basin appears contained in between three important straits: Gibraltar, Bosphorus and Suez; it was mostly through the Gibraltar strait that connection with the rest of the world and an exchange of nutrition for the marine flora and fauna was made possible in the past centuries. (Fig1)

The same basin is geographically encircled by three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa which, since their origins, have been crossroads of knowledge, traditions and wars. Certainly, religious influences have conditioned the relations between the different countries; it is important to mention that the Mediterranean saw the origin of three important monotheist religions: Christian, Islamic and Jewish. Throughout the years, this condition has caused a lot of conflicts and migrations. The topics of contradiction and cultural multiplicity emerge in our research, absorbing and metabolizing all the typical aspects of multiethnic cultures.

A well-known French historian, Fernand Braudel, described the Mediterranean as follows: "Che cos'è il Mediterraneo? Mille cose insieme. Non un Paesaggio, ma innumerevoli paesaggi. Non un mare, ma un susseguirsi di mari. Non una civiltà, ma una serie di civiltà accatastate le une sulle altre" (BRAUDEL, 2014). This quotation highlights the importance of

the Mediterranean in terms of diversity and multiplicity of identities. Through Braudel's eyes it is possible to cross the history of different cultures and traditions in which the concept of the Mediterranean basin is seen as a common inspiration for all the continents that look over this sea. Considering all of the above reflections, one of the main objectives of this unit is the identification of some common characteristics traceable in the Mediterranean environment. Certainty, as argued by Fernand Braudel, the autochthon elements we can find in this area belong to the natural world: the vine, the wheat and the olive originate in the beautiful and suitable climate typical of the region. But above all, the olive tree is the symbol of the Mediterranean flora.

For our purpose, the story of one of the most famous mythological sculptures sculpted by Phidias in the oriental tympanum of the Parthenon in Athens seems very relevant. The myth tells the battle between two important figures for the possession of ancient Attica: Athena and Poseidon. The story goes that Athena won the challenge thanks to an olive plant donated to the citizens of Attica. In his representation, Phidias organizes the composition by placing in between the two important figures of Athena and Poseidon (respectively representing one the earth goddess – dea terrestre – and the second the god of the sea) an olive

1 / The first attempts of cooperation within the regions of the Mediterranean basin was in the 1995 with the so-called Barcelona Process and the idea was to create an Euro-Mediterranean union. The next tentative was the Union pour la Méditerranée (UPM) launched in the summer of 2008 by the then president of the EU, Nicolas Sarkozy. UPM includes about forty countries from the EU and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. (SIGURA, 2014)



plant as a symbol of the union between land and sea. (Fig2)

Looking more closely at the location of the story recounted in the myth we notice another important phenomenon. The topographic distribution of the Acropolis in Athens certainly served as an interesting inspiration for the following centuries, something that is still visible today in many Mediterranean cities. At different historical moments, contemporary society has been influenced by a close relationship between classic creativity and contemporary experiments, celebrated through different creative expressions like: poetry, music, paintings, architecture, philosophy, culinary art, folklore, etc.

The influences of classical culture in the Mediterranean basin can be re-read through important books or interesting critical contributions (PAZZAGLINI, 2003). In this context, what's seems more relevant, is the amazing creative influence that the Acropolis Topography (together with the famous Phidias Mythos) gave to the Mediterranean basin in terms of organization of society, landscape and architecture. Following all of the above considerations, another important component that needs to be introduced emerges in our reflection: the podium concept. The three elements utilized by Phidias: Land, Sea and Nature (the last one represented by the olive plant) are practically sustained by the emblematic volume of the Parthenon suspended above the Acropolis podium which, in turn, is grooved through paths and covered by a dense vegetation composed of olive trees. (Fig3)

All the above considerations could guide an alert mind towards the reinterpretation of the Mediterranean sea as a huge podium which supported different identities and various types of modernities for many centuries. In other words, a kind of podium on which the word landscape is engraved through history, heritage, nature, living settlements, villages and cities with different stories but joined by a single, common base. (Fig4)

The above-mentioned characteristic is more evident if we observe how the Mediterranean sea, in the majority of the cases, presents a rich landscape vegetation that usually support cities and villages; it appears as a strip in between seaside and settlements. Following this argument, the three elements - water, land and nature - are joined by means of a large base that unites the entire Mediterranean basin.

Thus, I believe that the idea of the podium as a metaphor for life as well as sign of modern culture, able to move meanings through space and time, is deeply rooted in the Mediterranean culture. (Fig6)

The influential area will be considered as a gathering point of common interest research, projects and cultural activities. Before mentioning the geographical relation with the other Mediterranean nations we must reflect further upon the importance of the Mediterranean sea in relation to the contour, the land belt that overlooks the Mediterranean.

Nowadays, in general terms, we can state that all the cities exposed to the sea are considered Mediterranean cities; in reality if we go deeper with our analysis, the influence of the sea frequently goes



Fig2 / Reconstruction of the west pediment of the Parthenon
source / commons.wikimedia.org



Fig3 / The Olive trees in the Mediterranean Basin
source / Gaussen & De Philippis – FAO

beyond the coast and reaches the inner land, encountering different cultures and traditions. In our frame of interest, we will also consider some sort of transversal connection between the coastline and the inner land in which strategic corridors can become focal links in terms of common interest. For this reason we can classify our networks in terms of transversality, stripes, points of interest and city networks.

OMB – geographic actions

From a geographical point of view, the Balkan cities will be considered as a

priority, especially the ones directly exposed to the sea line. On a larger scale, the Mediterranean can offer much more connectivity considering its boundary along Gibraltar, Bosphorus and Suez straits. This is why an attempt to promote geographical actions is needed, in order to guide the choices of international partners and common research interests.

Another important way in which geographical actions can contribute is the breaking of that sense of distance and prejudice that exists between countries and cities. This is a case in which sharing research activities and common projects



Fig4 / Acropolis View Athens
source / historiarrc.blogspot.it

22



Fig5a / The staircase of Campidoglio square - Michelangelo Buonarroti 1548
source / studyblue.com



Fig5b / The Amalfi Landscape Italy
source / positano.news.it

can offer a new perspective, one centered on building and a high sense of community (BOTTA, 2010).

Trasversality: in this case the relation is given by a line, not necessary straight, in which inner cities and seaside cities can be joined, sharing common experience and activities. A typical example is retraceable in the case of via Egnazia. It is not by chance that many of these lines coincide with the ancient Roman path. Within the logic of transversality as infrastructure, there is also the idea of the riverbank as a connection between the seaside and inland.

The contours: they refer to the city-landscape and sea-landscape belonging to the coastline. In some cases, this typology of network can be connected to specific points in the inner land. The example of the blue corridor in the east of Europe along with the panoramic Riviera road can contribute to provide a new perspective in terms of tourism and landscape characterization in the Albania coastline.

The centralities, the points, the nodes: this is the case in which important cities can offer a great contribution in terms of urban design study and in respect to the surrounding influential areas. Mediterranean City patterns can be compared by searching for common identities and different ways to solve the urban dilemma.

In some cases all the above categories can work as a network for developing a new concept of a sustainable city in which the richness of the sea landscape can greatly contribute to the cities inland and vice versa.

The main arguments. The OMB as Mediterranean breviary

To appropriately define the topic of this unit, we must start with those characters that primary contribute in the creation of such important attention on the Mediterranean concept. The identification of the Albanian Landscape², in terms of important meanings, is something definable through commons characteristics traceable in the biophysical, anthropic as well as some local traditional meanings. The beauty of the landscape can be rediscovered through the identification of specific actions in order to capture some historical and natural persistence in the Albanian landscape and to reconnect it with the Mediterranean context. The Mediterranean is a source of a multiplicity and contradiction with different identities but, at the same time, common characteristics traceable in the world between land and sea. One of the limits of this Research can be retraceable in that infinity of meanings which the Mediterranean contains, from this perspective, it is quite impossible to find clear guidelines. Doubtlessly, the first attempt should be related to the interest

2 / The meanings of landscape in this contest, must be read as multiple way to perceive the beauty of a territory reach of social traditions and heritage. For this reason the word landscape can be associated to all the layers that composed the actual Albanian panorama.

3 / Pedrag Matvejevic was born in Mostar (Bosnia-Erzegovina) from Russian father and Croat Mather. He thought France letterature at the Zagabria University, letterature comparate at the Sorbona University of Paris and he was full Professor of "slavistica" La Sapienza of Rome and at College of France.



Fig5c / Cape square Durrës. Boomlandscape and Cityforster / 2014-2015
source / shapedscape.com

24



Fig5d / The monumental staircase of Spagna square / F. De Sanctis and A. Specchi / 1723-1726
source / romeguide.it



*Fig5e / Annunziata Church in Lipari
source / notiziarioeolie.it*

and research already present in the POLIS environment, in the already established networks with the other universities and in the field of European financing. For this reason, as a starting point and as part of the brainstorming process, we must individuate basic elements in which our competences and skills can find cross point of interests. In this frame of thinking, the idea suggested by Predrag Matvejević³, in his book *Mediterranean breviary*, namely the description of the organism that is the Mediterranean through basic elements, assumed great relevance (MATVEJEVIC, 2013). The Predrag breviary introduces the importance of some basic elements as a guide towards better understanding the fascination of such an old presence like the Mediterranean basin.

The beauty of this book lies in the constantly highlighting of the concept that such a complexity can be seen only through a bottom-up process. According to Predrag Matvejević, the way to observe the Mediterranean basin is comparable to the way in which the marine Sciences analyze the structure of the sea through: the study of the itineraries, tides, currents, salinity, the stratigraphic relief, etc. The book is structured in such a way as to appreciate the simplicity of primary elements like: the sun, the sea color, the piers, the inlands, the peninsula, the waves, buoys, hemp ropes or cables, the cemetery, the rain, the water, the wells, the lighthouses, etc. and many others. All those components can be considered as pieces of a huge mosaic. For Matvejević, those are some of the basic components in which the complexity of the Mediterranean can be observed,

captured and understood.

Looking at the above mentioned considerations, the first attempt could be retractable in the individuation of basic elements describable like reactive elements. The purpose of this is to open debates and gather common interest within the same umbrella. Primary landscape elements like: Water, Heritage, City, Food and infrastructure can be relevant points of discussion reconsidering the importance of certain aspects within the Albania seascape. Using the Predrag Matvejević intuition we can draw from the Mediterranean basin many basic meanings on which better describe The Albania Context. All those elements could have the capacity to be common topics useful to sharing knowledge and tradition with the other cities around the Mediterranean band.

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