

MEMORY
and the
MEDITERRANEAN

Fernand Braudel

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INTRODUCTION

Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) was the greatest historian of the twentieth century. So universal has his influence been on the study of history since the publication of his first major work fifty years ago that it is almost impossible for us to remember what history was like before Braudel. For that reason we often tend to forget how important was this revolution in historical method: it takes a discovery like that presented here, of a lost work by the master on his favourite theme, to remind us of our debt to him.

Braudel liked to think of himself as a typical Frenchman from the provinces. In his memory he belonged to a peasant family from Lorraine, on the borders of France and Germany. Because of poor health he had indeed spent his early years in the village of Luméville-en-Ornois at his paternal grandmother's smallholding, with its chickens, stone walls, and espaliered fruit trees, in a world that (as he described it) was still centred on the blacksmith, the wheelwright, the itinerant woodcutters and an ancient mill. He subsumed the contemporary realities of industrial Lorraine and the ever-present threat from Germany into this idyllic picture, along with the fact that his later childhood and adolescence were spent in Paris and its suburbs, where his father was a teacher of mathematics. On leaving school Braudel did not compete for entry to the elite institution of the *École Normale Supérieure* but instead went to the Sorbonne. There he was attracted to economic and social history and the study of ancient Greece, and to the lectures of history professors outside the mainstream, which usually had audiences of only four to seven people. He chose resolutely to identify himself with the margins of French society and to escape from his Parisian bourgeois background to a career in the provinces. In 1923, at the age of twenty-one, he travelled to his first post as a history teacher, at the grammar school of Constantine in Algeria, and here he saw the Mediterranean for the first time.

His true intellectual formation began in Algeria, a world in which a young man could take himself seriously. He turned from studying the past of

Lorraine (which he came to think was too full of national problems) to that of Spain, and he began to contemplate a traditional historical thesis on the Mediterranean policy of Philip II between 1559 and 1574; by 1927 he was publishing reviews of books on Spanish history. But he was also fascinated by the new history of Lucien Febvre, based on the science of human geography, as exemplified in a book written in 1913 but not published until 1922, *La Terre et l'évolution humaine*, translated as *A Geographical Introduction to History* (London, 1932). Braudel read the book in 1924. As usual his approach was cautious: it was three years before he began to write to Febvre, and their close personal friendship did not begin for another ten years. Meanwhile, in his first reply to Braudel, Febvre had planted a serious doubt about Braudel's subject of research:

Philip II and the Mediterranean, a good subject. But why not the Mediterranean and Philip II? A much larger subject. For between these two protagonists, Philip and the middle sea, the division is not equal.

Braudel was a successful schoolteacher and became known as an expert in his chosen area. In 1932 he returned to Paris and was nominated to a series of more and more prestigious *lycées*; in 1933 he married one of his earliest pupils from Algiers. Then he made a decision that was to change his life: in 1935 he accepted the offer of a five-year secondment to the new university being established with French help at São Paulo, Brazil. It was a golden chance for him and for others of his generation who had not followed the easy road to break into French academic life; at least one of his contemporaries and friends in that enterprise is now equally famous—the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

"It was in Brazil that I became intelligent." Braudel was always an eminently practical man. He managed to rent a large mansion, complete with a Chevrolet and an Italian chauffeur, from someone who conveniently spent the period of the university terms in Europe. Each winter Braudel returned to Europe and worked in the archives of the great Mediterranean trading cities, such as Venice and Dubrovnik (Ragusa). He was an innovative researcher in two respects, conceptual and practical. He made the move from government archives to commercial archives, and by chance he invented the microfilm, which he used in order to copy two or three thousand documents a day, to be read during the university year in Brazil.

I bought this machine in Algiers: it belonged to an American cameraman and was used to make rough images of scenes for films. On it you had a button that allowed you to take one photo at a time, or you pressed it and you took the whole shoot at once. When I was offered it, I said to the cameraman, "Photograph me that: if I can read it, I'll buy it." He made me a magnificent photo. And that's how I made kilometres of microfilms. It worked so well that when I was in Brazil I could spend whole days reading documents.

In 1936, during the long voyage back to Brazil in a cargo boat, he told his wife that he had decided to make the Mediterranean the centre of his research. A year later he was offered and accepted a post with a much lower salary at the main research centre in Paris, the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, in one of the two nonscientific sections, the IVe Section (historical and philological sciences). By chance the boat on which he and his wife travelled home from Brazil in 1937 was carrying Lucien Febvre back from a lecture tour in Buenos Aires; during the two-week voyage they became close friends. Febvre, now aged sixty and a professor at the *Collège de France*, had been one of the two young professors at Strasbourg who founded the polemical journal *Annales* in 1929. The journal sought to create a new and more open approach to history in a provocatively colloquial style, an approach defined mostly by its search for "a larger and a more human history" (Marc Bloch), by its denial of all historical barriers and by its rejection of the traditional history of politics and government in favour of a deeper analysis of social and economic forces. From this time on Febvre became Braudel's friend, intellectual adviser and confidant.

When war began, Braudel was mobilised in the artillery and stationed on the frontier in Alsace; he saw no fighting, but he was forced to surrender after the Germans encircled the French army. Despite the armistice, in 1940 he was imprisoned at Mainz, where he remained until 1942. Then he was denounced by fellow officers as being a supporter of De Gaulle rather than Pétain and sent to a special "discipline camp" for "enemies of Germany" at Lübeck. He remained until 1945. He was reasonably happy amid all sorts of "dissidents"—partisans of De Gaulle, French Jewish officers, sixty-seven French priests of all descriptions, escapees, "all the best types in the French army," together with English airmen and Dutch, Swedish and Polish officers. He only missed the German books that he could find in the municipal library of Mainz.

It was during these four years of captivity that Braudel wrote the first

draft of his monumental work, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Assisted by a few books, but using mainly his prodigious memory of his prewar researches, he constructed a work that combined a vast chronological and historical sweep with a mass of minute details, covering the entire Mediterranean world from the Renaissance to the sixteenth century. This immense intellectual achievement was written in exercise books on a small plank in a room shared with twenty prisoners. At intervals parcels of the manuscript would arrive in Paris for criticism by Febvre; by the end of the war the work was finished, only to be rewritten at the rate of thirty to fifty pages a day until it was finally presented in 1947 as a thesis of 1,160 pages.

The transformation of Braudel's thought in captivity remains a mystery, although recent publications of writing from this period offer some insights. In one sense *The Mediterranean* was, as he said, "a work of contemplation," his escape into a world that he could control and whose detailed realities he could believe in with greater ease than the artificial world of prison life. In 1941 he wrote a rare letter from Mainz to his wife (who was living in Algeria): "As always I am reading, writing, working. I have decided to expand my work to the period from 1450 to 1650: one must think big, otherwise what is the point of history?" In the two camps he gave miniature university lectures to his fellow prisoners. Notebooks containing the text of some of these have been discovered and were published in 1997. They show that the reflective experience of prison was crucial to his historical thought, for in these lectures he sets out virtually all the great themes that he presented after the war.

Shortly before the presentation of his thesis, Braudel had been passed over as Professor of History at the Sorbonne in favour of a more conventional historian. At his rival's viva voce examination, he sought to justify the choice, telling Braudel: "You are a geographer; allow me to be the historian." In retrospect it is clear that this moment marked a turning point in the intellectual history of France: over the next thirty years the Sorbonne stagnated as a conservative backwater, while outside the university system Braudel proceeded to construct his great empire of "the human sciences," and to open a series of vistas that could perhaps never have found their place within a more conventional university atmosphere, where orthodoxy in teaching was valued above originality of ideas.

Braudel made his reputation with *The Mediterranean*, which was published in 1949; a second revised and reorganised edition was published in 1966, in preparation for the American edition of 1973, in the magnificent

translation of Siân Reynolds (who takes leave of Braudel with the present book). With this new edition Braudel became the best-known historian in the world. My generation was brought up to believe in the words of its preface: the old history of events was indeed dead, "the action of a few princes and rich men, the trivia of the past, bearing little relation to the slow and powerful march of history . . . those statesmen were, despite their illusions, more acted upon than actors." In their place Braudel offered not "the traditional geographical introduction to history that often figures to so little purpose at the beginning of so many books, with its description of the mineral deposits, types of agriculture and typical flora, briefly listed and never mentioned again, as if the flowers did not come back every spring, the flocks of sheep migrate every year, or the ships sail on a real sea that changes with the seasons," but a whole new way of looking at the past, in which the historian recreated a lost reality through a feat of historical imagination based on detailed knowledge of the habits and techniques of the ploughman, the shepherd, the potter, and the weaver, the skills of the vintage and the olive press, the milling of corn, the keeping of records of bills of lading, tides and winds. It began to seem as important for a historian to be able to ride a horse or sail a ship as to sit in a library. Only the third section of Braudel's book returned to the history of events, "surface disturbances, crests of foam that the tides of history carry on their strong backs." Braudel taught us to see that historical time was divided into three forms of movement—geographical time, social time, and individual time—but that beyond all this the past was a unity and a reality. All these movements belonged together: "history can do more than study walled gardens."

This was the ultimate expression of the intellectual ambitions of the *Annales* school, which was reborn after the war and the Nazi execution of Marc Bloch, one of its two founders and a hero of the resistance. Braudel became a member of the *Annales* editorial board. Meanwhile, in 1947, a new section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* had been formed (with the help of money from the Rockefeller Foundation): the famous VIe Section in social sciences, with Febvre as its president and Braudel as his assistant. In 1949 Braudel was elected to the Collège de France, and in the same year he was given the immensely powerful position of president of the *agrégation* in history, the general qualifying examination for teaching in secondary schools. His reforms were resisted by the conservatives, but they could not dislodge him until 1955. The record of what he sought to achieve is contained in his little textbook for teachers called *Grammar of Civilizations* (written between

1962 and 1963, republished in 1987), designed to introduce contemporary history and world history to the school curriculum. History was divided into six civilizations—Western, Soviet, Muslim, the Far East, southeast Asia, and black Africa, all of course of relevance to a France still, at least in memory, committed to its status as a colonial power. Braudel's attempts at reform were destroyed by an unholy alliance of right and left, for he was one of the few French intellectuals who belonged to neither camp. He was therefore hated by Georges Pompidou, who held proto-Thatcherite views on the unimportance of all history apart from the history of one's own country and who irrationally regarded Braudel as responsible for the events of 1968. At the same time Braudel was denounced by orthodox communists as "a willing slave of American imperialism."

Lucien Febvre died in 1956, and Braudel inherited the direction of both the Ecole Pratique and the journal *Annales*. In the first institution he created and fostered one of the most extraordinary collections of talent in the twentieth century through his appointments: to mention only the most famous of his colleagues, they included the historians Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and Maurice Aymard; the philosophers Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault; the psychologists Jacques Lacan and Georges Devereux; the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss; and the classical scholars Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. Braudel worked hard to create a separate institution or building where all his colleagues could work together, and where a succession of foreign visitors could be invited as associate professors; this idea, begun about 1958, did not achieve physical shape until the opening of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in 1970. And it was only after he retired in 1972 that the VIe Section finally metamorphosed into its present status as a new and independent teaching institution, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

In and through *Annales* Braudel sought to promote and defend his conception of history. For thirty years the great debates on the nature of history took place in its pages. In retrospect one can see four successive but overlapping issues with which he engaged.

The first debate was provoked by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's claims that the theory of structuralism offered an explanation of human social organisation. Braudel had been possibly the first historian to use the word *structure* in his original thesis, but he saw that the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss was fundamentally antihistorical, in that it sought to explain all human soci-

eties in terms of a single theory of structures. The notions of *difference* and of *change* that are basic to all historical thought were simply dismissed as irrelevant to the search for a universal underlying structure, which existed in the human mind if not in the physical universe itself. Against this, in a famous article in *Annales* (1958) on the "*longue durée*," Braudel sought to explain his own historical conception of the varieties of underlying forces influencing human society, which he had already formulated during the writing of his thesis in relation to the static forces and the slow movements behind the ephemeral history of events. Braudel's conception of the *longue durée* (usually translated rather misleadingly as "the long perspective") is not easy to express in non-historical terms as a theoretical concept; it is the recognition that human society develops and changes at different rates in relation to *different underlying forces*, and that all the elements within any human situation interact with one another. There are underlying geographical constraints; there are natural regularities of behaviour related to every activity, whether climatic or seasonal or conventional; there are social customs; there are economic pressures; and there are short-term events in history with their resulting consequences—battles, conquests, powerful rulers, reforms, earthquakes, famines, diseases, tribal loves and hatreds. To translate the messy complications that constitute the essence of history into a general theory is impossible, and this fact represents the *ultimate problem of trying to subsume history within any abstract theory*, from whatever philosophical or sociological or anthropological source it is derived.

The second debate concerned quantitative history: after *The Mediterranean* Braudel became more and more attracted to the idea of quantification in economic history, the notion that history could become scientifically respectable through the use of graphs and tables and the collection of hard quantifiable data. It took the example of his disciple Pierre Chaunu, who sought to surpass Braudel with his immense work of 7,800 pages on Seville and the Atlantic trade (finally published in 1963) to convince Braudel that something was missing from this type of statistical history. History was something *more than the effect of the fluctuations* in the Spanish-American trade or the economic boom and decline of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was in response to this debate that Braudel wrote his *second great work*, translated as *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century* (1982). The first volume of this work was originally published in 1967 and translated into English as *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800* (1973). It presented a vivid picture of social life and its structures before the Industrial Revolution, in

terms of population, bread, food and drink, fashion, housing, energy sources, technology, money, cities and towns. This was revised and incorporated into a three-volume work with a one-word addition to the title: *Material Civilization, Economy and Capitalism* (1979). The work now approached the whole question of the origins of modern world capitalism. The second volume dealt with the organisation of commerce, manufacture and capitalism, the third with the growth of a world economy and world trade. His conclusion was both historical and practical: it is small-scale business and freedom of trade that both produce and sustain capitalism, not state enterprise or large-scale capitalism. Without the independent small artisan and the merchant-shopkeeper no economic system can survive, and these smaller entities are embedded in the social fabric so that society and economy can never be separated from each other. His work stands therefore as a refutation through the study of history of both communism and capitalism.

The third issue with which Braudel was involved was a consequence of his growing distance from the most talented historians whom he had called to join him in the management of *Annales*. The new history of the sixties turned away from the factual certainties of economic and descriptive social history, and explored the "history of mentalities." The historical world was created out of perceptions, not out of events, and we needed to recognise that the whole of history was a construct of human impressions. The crucial problem for a history that still sought a degree of certainty and an escape from arbitrariness or fiction was to analyse the mental world that created an age or a civilisation. It was the medieval historians Duby, Le Goff and Ladorie who pioneered this approach from 1961 onward; it meant a whole-scale return to the old German conceptions of cultural history, and to the use of literary and artistic sources alongside archival material. This was perhaps one of Braudel's blind spots: to him, it was the realities of peasant or merchant existence that mattered, not the way that they might be expressed in artistic or literary form. He was also more and more interested in the global sweep and saw the detailed studies of the mental world of small communities undertaken by his colleagues as a betrayal of the grand vision. As he said to Ladorie in relation to his famous book *Montaillou*, "We brought history into the dining room; you are taking it into the bedroom." His disapproval of these trends cost him the direction of his journal, and by 1969 he had abandoned *Annales*, sidelined by those whose careers he had started and whom he had originally invited to join him.

Braudel's reply to this development was long in coming and remains incomplete; it was his last great projected work, *The Identity of France*. Three

volumes were published before his death, comprising the first two parts on geography and demography and economy: these were for him traditional territory. With the third and fourth he would be entering new territory by writing about the state, culture, and society, and in the fourth about "France outside France." Fragments of the third volume were published in 1997. They suggest that in this last work he intended to confound his critics by proving that the "mentality" of France was contained within its physical, social and economic history. The peasant was the key to the history of France, and a true history of mentalities could only be written in the *longue durée* and from a long perspective. History must do more than study walled gardens.

The difficulty of translating *longue durée* with the phrase "the long perspective" reveals another problem that was perhaps to emerge in the later debates with Michel Foucault. Braudel never claimed that his categories were absolute. They were only means of organising the explanatory factors in any situation, but equally he was not prepared to see them simply as constructs fashioned by the observer for his immediate purposes. However indeterminate and changeable, they did possess a real existence as forces in the field of history. This was challenged by the theories and methods of Foucault in his *Words and Things* (1966), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). The idea of historical relativity introduced in these works and adopted by postmodern historians took one step beyond the history of mentalities. Not only did the uncertainty contained in the study of history rest on its derivation from a set of human impressions rather than facts: the crucial role in this process belonged to the historian as interpreter. Indeed, the whole organisation of knowledge could be seen as a construction designed to control the world. History, like all the social sciences, was an aspect of power, so that history was both the history of forms of control and itself a form of control, not an innocent activity. All this is still highly controversial today, but it was of course one step worse for Braudel than the history of mentalities. The historian was no longer the innocent observer but himself complicitous in society's attempt to marginalize groups such as the women, aboriginal peoples, the mad, criminals, and homosexuals, and through its control of the psychology of humanity to construct mechanisms of social power—or ultimately (in Foucault's last work) a more beneficent form of the control of the self. Moreover, Foucault singled out the Braudelian conception of history for special attack: it was ideas and the sudden rupture created by them (exemplified in his own books), not the long perspective, which mattered in a history dominated by random change, by discontinuities instead of structures.

This theoretical debate had just begun in 1968. Braudel was giving a lecture series in Chicago when he was recalled to face—at the age of sixty-two—the revolutionary student movement. Like many radical professors he was sympathetic but uncomprehending of the anarchic streak in youthful protest; his interventions were paternalistic and not well received, and later he condemned the revolution because it made people less rather than more happy. He could not understand the desire to destroy everything that he had personally tried to build outside the university system of which both he and they disapproved, or their contempt for facts and research in face of neocommunist and anarchist ideas.

More dangerous still for Braudel was the reaction, which brought the conservatives under Pompidou to power, and which placed the blame, not on their own resistance to change, but on those who had tried to encourage change. Had not the “events” of 1968 proved the importance of the history of events? Where now was the long perspective? “Has Structuralism Been Killed by May ’68?,” as a headline in *Le Monde* put it in November of that year. Either the new history (whatever it was) was responsible for the “events,” or it was disproved by them. As a conservative you could have it both ways, and both implicated Braudel along with all his intellectual opponents. This was of course to accuse the Enlightenment of causing the French Revolution, but the claim was successful in blocking Braudel’s access to government circles almost for the first time in his career. The university conservatives had indeed lost, and the old Sorbonne was swept away, but they also had their revenge on the man who was most responsible for establishing their irrelevance to modern life.

Braudel ended his life as he began it, as an outsider, but not unhappy with this fate. He had always believed in the importance of accepting reality and the relative powerlessness of the individual in the face of his circumstances, even though he had himself ruled French intellectual life “as a prince” for a generation. Above all, despite his recognition of the importance of the grand vision and the power of the *longue durée* and of structures, he had always upheld that crucial historical value, the centrality of the individual as the subject of history; not the individual great man but the anonymous yet real peasant, the ordinary unknown man. In this sense he remains more truly revolutionary than any of his opponents on the left or the right.

How powerful the legacy of Braudel, and especially of his *Mediterranean*, still is and how modern its conception still appears, can be seen by considering its

impact on two recent books. The first is Barry Cunliffe’s *Facing the Ocean: The Atlantic and Its Peoples* (2001), in which Cunliffe seeks to do for the Atlantic what Braudel once did for the Mediterranean. The title of his last chapter makes explicit reference to Braudel’s *longue durée*. The second is the latest book on the Mediterranean, whose first volume appeared in the year 2000, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*. For all its immense learning and resolute up-to-dateness, this work too is inconceivable without the example of Braudel: it is an attempt to answer the same questions as Braudel for the centuries before the age of Philip II. When we were young we all of us indeed dreamed of writing a book on the Mediterranean that would replace in its title Philip II of Spain with that earlier Philip II of Macedon.

It is not therefore surprising that this work, Braudel’s *Memory and the Mediterranean*, although it was originally written a generation ago, can still serve as a model. This little book exemplifies all the ideas that Braudel believed in, and for that reason it is richer than most of the detailed books by experts written both before and since its composition. It contains all those elements that he taught us to respect, and offers new surprises. The first is its scope and its exemplification of the meaning of the *longue durée*. A history of the ancient Mediterranean would normally begin with the Minoan age, or not earlier than 2000 B.C.; Braudel invites us to consider the Mediterranean, not geographically, but as a historical phenomenon beginning in the Paleolithic age or even with the start of geological time; as he points out, the historical period of classical civilization belongs in the last two minutes of the year, and the last two chapters of his book. How Braudel would have relished the new perspectives on the early stages of evolution and the biological history of the universe that are being revealed by the new uses of genetics in archaeology and evolutionary biology. How he would have loved the enrichment of our knowledge of the origins of human art in the Paleolithic age with the new discoveries of the Grotte Chauvet in the Ardèche.

Braudel’s picture also invites us to consider the Mediterranean in its broadest geographical context, inclusive of the great civilisations of Iraq and Egypt, the steppes of Russia, the forests of Germany, and the deserts of the Sahara. For him Mediterranean history is an aspect of world history. Within the context of human history he emphasises two themes. The first is what I would call the reality principle. Human history is a history of technological mastery and the development of the skills basic to ancient civilisation: fire and water technology, pottery, weaving, metalworking, seafaring and finally

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writing. This emphasis on the physical realities of early civilisations brings out the actual quality of life with a vividness that no amount of reading other books can achieve. The second is the importance of exchange, especially long-distance exchange: "Our sea was from the very dawn of its protohistory a witness to those imbalances productive of change which would set the rhythm of its entire life." It is imbalance that creates exchange and therefore leads to progress. These two ideas, first formulated in *The Mediterranean* and subsequently explored in depth in for the preindustrial world in *Civilization and Capitalism*, are here applied to the ancient Mediterranean with magnificent effect. This deceptively modest book is indeed the work of the greatest historian of the twentieth century, and the new poem by Christopher Logue will serve as a fitting preamble.*

Oswyn Murray

*In writing this essay I have been helped of course by Braudel's own brief description of his historical development published in English in the *Journal of Modern History* for 1972, but more especially by the magnificent biography of Pierre Daix, *Braudel* (Flammarion, 1995). The lectures from the period of the Second World War and the fragments related to the third volume of Braudel's *L'Identité de la France* are published in *Les ambitions de l'Histoire* (Editions de Fallois, 1997).

Christopher Logue's poem was first published in Harold Berliner's deluxe edition of *War Music* (Nevada City, California, 1999). It is reprinted here for the first time as fitting homage to Braudel, for which privilege I thank my friend Christopher Logue.

CHAPTER ONE

Seeing the Sea

The best witness to the Mediterranean's age-old past is the sea itself. This has to be said and said again; and the sea has to be seen and seen again. Simply looking at the Mediterranean cannot of course explain everything about a complicated past created by human agents, with varying doses of calculation, caprice and misadventure. But this is a sea that patiently recreates for us scenes from the past, breathing new life into them, locating them under a sky and in a landscape that we can see with our own eyes, a landscape and sky like those of long ago. A moment's concentration or daydreaming, and that past comes back to life.

An ancient scar on the terrestrial globe

But if that is true, if the Mediterranean seems so alive, so eternally young in our eyes, "always ready and willing," what point is there in recalling this sea's great age? What does it matter, the traveller may think, what can it possibly matter, that the Mediterranean, an insignificant breach in the earth's crust, narrow enough to be crossed at contemptuous speed in an aeroplane (an hour from Marseille to Algiers, fifteen minutes from Palermo to Tunis, and the rest to match) is an ancient feature of the geology of the globe? Should we care that the Inland Sea is immeasurably older than the oldest of the human histories it has cradled? Yes, we should: the sea can be only be fully understood if we view it in the long perspective of its geological history. To this it owes its shape, its architecture, the basic realities of its life, whether we are thinking of yesterday, today or tomorrow. So let us look at the record.

In the Paleozoic era, millions and millions of years ago, removed from us by a chronological distance that defies the imagination, a broad band of sea known to geologists as Tethys ran from the West Indies to the Pacific. Following the lines of latitude, it bisected what would much later become the land-mass of the Ancient World. The present-day Mediterranean is the residual mass of water from Tethys, and it dates back almost to the earliest days of the planet.

The many violent foldings of the Tertiary era took place at the expense of this very ancient Mediterranean, much larger than the present one. All the mountains, from the Baetic Cordillera to the Rif, the Atlas, the Alps and the Apennines, the Balkans, the Taurus and the Caucasus, were heaved up out of the ancient sea. They reduced its area, raising from the great sea bed not only sedimentary rocks—sands, clays, sandstones, thick layers of limestone—but also deeply buried primitive rocks. The mountains surrounding, strangling, barricading and compartmentalizing the long Mediterranean coastline are the flesh and bones of the ancestral Tethys. Everywhere the sea water has left traces of its slow labour. The sedimentary limestones outside Cairo, “so fine-grained and of such milky whiteness that they allow the sculptor’s chisel to give the sensation of volume by working to a depth of only a few millimetres”; the great slabs of coralline limestone from which the megalithic temples in Malta were built; the stone of Segovia which is easier to work when wet; the limestone of the Latomies (the huge quarries of Syracuse); the Istrian stones of Venice and many other rock formations in Greece, Italy and Sicily—all these came from the sea bed.

Volcanoes and earthquakes

At the end of this process, since the series of Mediterranean trenches was never filled in, the sea was left as a deep basin, its hollows as if scooped out by some desperate hand, its depths in places equal or superior to the heights of the tallest Mediterranean mountains. Near Cape Matapan runs a sea-trench 4600 metres deep, easily enough to drown the tallest peak in Greece: Mount Olympus, 2985 metres high. Whether under the water or on land, the relief of the whole area is unstable. Networks of long fault lines are visible everywhere, some reaching as far as the Red Sea. The narrow passage of the Pillars of Hercules between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean is the result of at least a twofold fault.

All this suggests a tortured geology, a process of orogenesis not yet stable

even today. It accounts for the frequent and often catastrophic earthquakes, for the hot springs which the Etruscans had already discovered in Tuscany, and for the broad volcanic zones, with their strings of volcanoes, extinct, active or potentially active. Mount Etna was the fabled home of the Cyclops, blacksmiths and makers of thunderbolts, wielding their mighty bullhide bel-lows; here, much later, the philosopher Empedocles is supposed to have cast himself into the crater, from which a lone sandal was recovered. “How often we have seen boiling Etna spill forth balls of fire and molten rock!” remarked Virgil. Vesuvius really did destroy Pompeii and Herculaneum in AD 79. And in the years before 1943 its plume of smoke could be seen hanging over Naples. Every night, in the Lipari archipelago, between Sicily and Italy, Stromboli still lights up the sea with its incandescent lava displays. Earthquakes and eruptions have continually punctuated the past and still threaten the present in Mediterranean countries. One of the most ancient of mural paintings (and I mean mural, not cave painting) in a temple at Çatal Höyük in Anatolia dating from 6200 B.C., represents a volcanic eruption, probably of the nearby Hasan Dag.

We shall have occasion to return to the “Plutonian” convulsions of the earth’s crust apropos of Minoan Crete, notably the cataclysmic explosion of the nearby island of Thera (known today as Santorini) in about 1470–1450 B.C. Half the island was hurled into the air, creating a massive tidal wave and an apocalyptic rain of ash. Today the strange island of Santorini is a semi-crater, partially submerged under the sea. According to the archaeologist Claude Schaeffer earthquakes and seismic shocks also contributed to the swift and unexpected destruction of all the Hittite cities in Asia Minor in the early twelfth century B.C. In this instance, nature rather than human intervention may have been responsible for a cataclysm that still puzzles historians.

The ever-present mountains

Mountains are all around in the Mediterranean. They come right down to the sea, taking up more than their share of space, piling up one behind another, forming the inescapable frame and backdrop of every landscape. They hinder transport, turn coast roads into corniches and leave little room for serene landscapes of cities, cornfields, vineyards or olive-groves, since altitude always gets the better of human activity. The people of the Mediterranean have been confined not only by the sea—a potential means of escape, but for countless ages so dangerous that it was used little if at all—but also by the mountains.

Up in the high country, with few exceptions, only the most primitive ways of life could take hold and somehow survive. The Mediterranean plains, for lack of space, are mostly confined to a few coastal strips, a few pockets of arable land. Above them run steep and stony paths, hard on the feet of men and the hooves of beasts alike.

Worse still, the plains, especially those of any size, were often invaded by floodwaters and had to be reclaimed from inhospitable marshland. The fortunes of the Etruscans depended in part on their skill at draining the semi-flooded flatlands. The larger the plain, of course, the harder and more backbreaking the task of drainage, and the later the date at which it was undertaken. The great stretches of the Po valley, watered by the wild rivers of the Alps and Apennines, were a no man's land for almost the entire prehistoric period. Humans hardly settled there at all until the pile-based dwellings of the *terramare*, in about 1500 B.C.

On the whole, human settlement took more readily to the hillsides, as being more immediately habitable than the plains. Lowland sites, which called for land improvement, could be occupied only by hierarchical societies, those able to create a habitable environment by collective effort. These were the opposite of the high-perched hill settlements, poor but free, with which they had contacts born of necessity, but always tinged with apprehension. The lowlanders felt and wished themselves to be superior: they had plenty to eat and their diet was varied; but their wealth, their cities, their open roads and their fertile crops were a constant temptation to attackers. Telemachus had nothing but contempt for the acorn-eating mountain-dwellers of the Peloponnese. It was logical that Campania and Apulia should dread the peasants of the Abruzzi, shepherds who at the first sign of winter swarmed down with their flocks to the milder climate of the plains. Given the choice, the Campanians would rather face the Roman barbarians than the barbarians from the local mountains. The service Rome rendered southern Italy in the third century B.C. was to bring the wild and threatening massif of the Abruzzi to heel.

Dramatic descents from the mountains took place in every period and in every region of the sea. Mountain people—eaters of acorns and chestnuts, hunters of wild beasts, traders in furs, hides or young livestock, always ready to strike camp and move on—formed a perpetual contrast to lowlanders who remained bound to the soil, some as masters, some as slaves, but all part of a society based on working the land, a society with armies, cities, and seagoing ships. Traces of this dialogue remain even today, between the ice and snow of

the austere mountain tops and the lowlands where civilizations and orange-trees have always blossomed.

Life was simply not the same in the hills as in the plains. The plains aimed for progress, the hills for survival. Even the crops, growing at levels only a short walk apart, did not observe the same calendar. Wheat, sown as high up the mountainside as possible, took two months longer to ripen there than at sea level. Climatic disasters meant different things to crops at different altitudes. Late rains in April or May were a blessing in the mountains but a disaster lower down, where the wheat was almost ripe and might rust or rot on the stalk. This was as true of Minoan Crete as of Syria in the seventeenth century A.D. or Algeria in our own time.

The Sahara and the Atlantic

The one exception, where the mountains do not come right down to the sea, is the very long and unusually flat seaboard starting at the edge of the Sahara and running hundreds of kilometres, from the Tunisian *sahel* or coastal hills and the round island of Jerba (home of the Lotus-Eaters) to the Nile delta, which empties its fresh, muddy waters far out into the sea. The flat coastline runs even further round, as far as the mountains of Lebanon, which lent the cities of the Phoenicians, on their crowded islands and terraces overlooking the sea, their thoroughly Mediterranean character. Viewed from the air, when landscapes appear in brutal simplicity, the sea and the Sahara come into stark contrast: two great immensities, one blue, the other white shading away into yellow, ochre and orange.

In fact, the desert has had a powerful impact on the physical and human life of the sea. In human terms, every summer saw the desert nomads, a devastating multitude of men, women, children and animals, descend on the coast, pitching camp with their black tents woven from goat or camel hair. As neighbours, they could be troublesome, at times marauding. Like the mountain people, high above the fragile strips of civilization, the nomads were another perpetual menace. Every successful civilization on the Mediterranean coast was obliged to define its stance towards the mountain-dweller and the nomad, whether exploiting them, fighting them off, reaching some compromise with one or other, sometimes even keeping both of them at bay.

In spite of its great size, the desert never completely contained the peoples who inhabited it, but usually propelled them at regular intervals towards

the coast, or on to the *sahels*. Only small numbers of people took the caravan routes which criss-crossed the deserts like so many slow sea-passages across the stony and sandy wastes of Africa and Asia—oceans incomparably greater than the Mediterranean. But in the long run, these caravan routes created a fantastic network of connections reaching out to sub-Saharan Africa and the primitive gold-panning of the Senegal and Niger rivers, or the great civilizations bordering the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, the sites of the earliest experiments in ceramics, metal-working, jewellery, perfumes, miraculous medicines, spices and strange foods.

Physically, too, the desert has always invaded the Mediterranean. Every summer, the hot dry air above the Sahara envelops the entire sea basin, extending far beyond its northern shores. This is what creates those dazzling skies of startling clarity to be seen over the Mediterranean, and a starry night sky found nowhere else in such perfection. The dominant north-easterlies, from April to September, the Aetesian winds as the Greeks called them, bring no relief, no real moisture to the Saharan furnace. There, the summer sky is clouded only for a few short days when the *khamson* blows, or the sirocco, the wind Horace called the *plumbeus Auster*, heavy as lead. These southerly winds carrying grains of sand sometimes dropped from the sky that “rain of blood” which made sages wonder and simple mortals tremble.

Six months of drought, without a drop of rain, is a long time to wait, whether for plants, animals or humans. The forests, the indigenous vegetation of the Mediterranean mountains, could only survive if the inhabitants left them alone and did not build too many roads through them, burn too many clearings for crops, send flocks to graze in them, or fell too many trees for fuel or shipbuilding. Ravaged forests declined fast: maquis and scrub, with their rocky outcrops and fragrant plants and bushes, are the decadent forms of these mighty forests, which were always admired in the ancient Mediterranean as a rare treasure. Carthage, disadvantaged by its African site, sent to Sardinia for timber to build ships. Mesopotamia and Egypt were even worse placed.

The desert retreats only when the ocean advances. From October onwards, rarely earlier and often later, Atlantic depressions, heavy with moisture, begin to roll in from the west. As soon as a depression crosses the Straits of Gibraltar, or makes its way from the Bay of Biscay to the Gulf of Lions, it heads east, attracting from every compass point winds that propel it further eastwards. The sea grows dark, its waters take on the slate-grey tones of the Baltic, or are whipped up by gales into a mass of spray. And the storms begin.

Rain starts to fall, sometimes snow: streams which have been dry for months become torrents, cities disappear behind a curtain of driving rain and low cloud, giving the dramatic skyline of El Greco's paintings of Toledo. This is the season marked by the *imbribus atris* of the ancients, “dark rains” cutting off the light of the sun. Floods are frequent and sudden, rushing down through the plains of Roussillon, or the Mitidja of Algeria, striking Tuscany or Spain, or the countryside round Salonika. Sometimes this torrential rain-fall invades the desert, swamping the streets of Mecca, and turning the tracks through the northern Sahara into torrents of mud and water. At Aïn Sefra, south of Oran, Isabelle Eberhardt, a Russian exile fascinated by the desert, was killed in 1904 when a flash flood swept down the wadi.

But the Mediterranean winters have their gentle side too. Snow falls only rarely in the low-lying plains; there can be days of bright sunshine without the cold mistral or bora winds; the sea itself can become unexpectedly calm and the galleys of former times would have been able to risk a brief sortie. And the rain of the stormy season is much needed. The peasants of Aristophanes' plays make merry, drinking and talking the time away while Zeus, with mighty rainstorms, “makes the earth fertile.” In cold weather, let us heap logs on the fire and drink, advises Alcaeus, the ancient poet of Mytilene. There will always be time for the few tasks of the winter season: crushing grain or roasting it to keep it edible, heating and reducing sweet wine, cutting vine props, finding a curved branch of evergreen oak to make the plough handle, trapping migrating birds, weaving baskets, taking the mule into town to market.

Real work could only begin again after the last of the spring rains, when the swallows returned, as the old song of Rhodes recalled:

*Swallow, swallow,
Bringer of spring,
Swallow, white of throat,
Swallow, black of back . . .*

But spring is short-lived, almost over by the time the hyacinths or lilies bloom, or when the tiny flowers appear on the olive trees. The “dragging months of summer” begin, with their interminable round of tasks. The full farming calendar will be interrupted only in autumn, when, according to Hesiod, “the voice of the crane sends its call from the clouds,” heralding the time of planting and “the coming of rain-drenched winter.”

When things go wrong

I have of course simplified the mechanisms of the Mediterranean climate. It is certainly not a perfect agricultural model with two clear seasons; other influences play their part. But this account is not too misleading, so long as we remember that the mechanism can malfunction at times: rain can arrive too early or too late, there can be too much of it or too little, "winter can become like spring," wayward winds may bring an untimely drought or too much water, spring frosts may burn up the young wheat or the vine shoots, and the hot sirocco can parch the grain before it has had time to ripen. Peasant societies in the Mediterranean have always dreaded these surprises which can destroy everything in the twinkling of an eye, as fast as the "plagues of locusts"—and these too were frequent. In Kabylia, when the "gates of the year" opened (equinoxes and solstices), they used to say it was the signal for a new season "with its fortunes: barley bread or famine."

Was the only remedy artificial irrigation, the solution adopted by the earliest civilizations on the banks of rivers such as the Nile, the Euphrates or the Indus? In theory, yes. But even in these cases, some necessary circumstance had to make irrigation imperative. For it was a costly solution, requiring immense effort. Limited in extent, it brought help only to a few regions.

Waterways

Claudio Vita-Finzi's book *The Mediterranean Valleys* (1969) reminds us that the most spectacular events—volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, climate change—are not the only ones we should notice in retrospective geography. The waterways too have had a role to play, even the coastal streams which so often run dry in the Mediterranean.

Their role is twofold: as carriers of water, debris or alluvial clay, they were basically responsible for creating the arable plains which humans would laboriously cultivate; or as instruments of erosion, they might attack their own valley beds, cutting channels through their own flood plains and shifting them once more. Plato imagined that the waters had carried off "the soft thick layers" of earth in Attica: "all that remains is the bare carcass."

The value of Vita-Finzi's book is not so much that it distinguishes between these two types of long-term action, but that it historicizes their past, suggesting a kind of human history of the waterways that run down to the

Mediterranean. It is an exciting and eventful history, since flowing water mingles with every kind of natural phenomenon; and, more than one might imagine, it has also mingled with the particular destiny of mankind.

In the Paleolithic era, there began a long period of sedimentation, which was also responsible for the layers of ancient alluvial mud, the soils reddened by iron oxide. Between 30,000 and 10,000 B.C., the Nile flowed more abundantly than in the time of the Pharaohs, and accumulated its greatest volumes of mud. The Neolithic Age, when agriculture began, coincided unfortunately with a time of erosion, damaging to arable lands. This carried on until and during the Roman Empire, which sought to combat it by every means, building dykes, dams, and retaining terraces throughout North Africa, from Cyrenaica to Morocco. Halting only briefly, erosion made further advances towards the end of the Empire: water poured in to break the dams and dykes, and fertile soil was washed away. The Middle Ages, in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, were more fortunate: the waterways were more abundant and became once more the source of good river-valley soil. The Arabian geographers of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries were even able to compare the Sous, or the Shelif, with its regular flooding, to the Nile. We may think this an exaggeration, but these rivers were not then as they are today. It was in about the sixteenth century that the balance swung back the other way. Erosion began once more, the rivers cut channels through the ancient flats (sometimes forty metres deep) and carried off into the sea all the sand and mud accumulated there. The deltas expanded, but their fertile land was not easy to bring into cultivation. And it seems there is little hope today of finding an effective remedy to this general erosion of the land, which has been going on down to our own time.

The alternation between sedimentation and erosion is explained by changes in the sea level, by variations in the climate (more rainfall brings more erosion) and by human activity which may interfere with the composition of the layers of soil and modify the conditions of flow. This has been part of the equation since the Paleolithic era, when humans first caused forest fires (there are 5000 cubic metres of ash on one Algerian site from the Caspian era); and since Neolithic times, when the critical factors were slash-and-burn agriculture and grazing livestock.

These considerations open up new perspectives and oblige us to revise previous hypotheses. If the Roman Campagna was depopulated and became wasteland in the fourth century A.D., the reason may be sought not only in human negligence but in the increased waterflow which washed gravel and unhealthy waters down to the low-lying regions. Similarly, when malaria

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became virulent there in the sixteenth century, it was because water had flooded the flatlands and stayed there, obliging the residents either to wage war unremittingly against floodwaters, or to abandon the site.

All this helps to explain too why hill farming persisted and came to be of exceptional value in the Mediterranean: up above the waterlogged valleys, on the mountain slopes, a combination of wheat, olives, vines and fig-trees was cultivated from earliest times.

Limits on expansion

Let me sum up. We are too inclined to think of Mediterranean life as *la dolce vita*, effortlessly easy. But we are allowing the charms of the landscape to deceive us. Arable land is scarce there, while arid and infertile mountains are everywhere present ("plenty of bones, not enough meat" as one geographer has put it). Rainfall is unevenly distributed: plentiful when the vegetation is hibernating in winter, it disappears just when plant growth needs it. Wheat, like other annual plants, has to ripen quickly. Human labour is not relieved by the climate: all the heavy work has always had to be done when the summer heat is at its fiercest, and the resulting harvest crop is all too often meagre. Hesiod's advice in summer was to go "naked to sow, naked to plough, naked to reap," and Virgil repeated the tag: *nudus ara, sere nudus*. If the grain is in short supply at the end of the year, he adds, "then shake the oak tree of the forests to satisfy your hunger."

To all this, it should be added that the water of the Mediterranean, always quite warm, near 13 degrees centigrade over most of its area (hence the warm winter climate), is biologically very poor. The naturalist who knows the Atlantic, and then witnesses the "hauling up of pots and nets" in the Mediterranean, is astonished not to find there "that squirming variety of sea life that characterizes the rich ocean deeps." There are few species of fish and shellfish and most of them are small. There are of course some famous fishing-grounds, the lagoon of Comacchio, the lake of Bizerte, the Riviera of the Bosphorus and in the Hellespont the "passes of Abydos, rich in oysters." Shoals of tuna are hunted every year off the coast of Sicily, North Africa, Provence and Andalusia. But for all that, the overall harvest is lean. The *frutti di mare* may be exquisite perhaps, but their stocks are limited. There are several reasons for the shortfall. The coasts plunge abruptly into the water without shelving—and coastal shelves are the habitat of sea creatures. The animal and vegetable plankton is very poor—almost as bad as in the Sargasso Sea,

where the surface water for that very reason has the same blue transparency as the Mediterranean. And lastly there is the complicated marine history, which is responsible for frequent sudden shifts of salinity and temperature: the local species have been decimated one after another.

It is its narrow opening into the Atlantic that has been the Mediterranean's lifeline. Imagine if a dam were to seal up the Strait of Gibraltar: the Mediterranean would be transformed into a salt lake from which all life would disappear. If on the other hand it was more open to the Atlantic, the sea would be reinvigorated, revived by the traffic of the tides, invaded by oceanic fauna. The surface water would be disturbed, the exceptional warmth in winter would vanish. Which would we prefer? Perhaps we should be resigned to eating frozen fish from the Atlantic, which is brought regularly to the Mediterranean. Then when we visit Venice, it will be a great luxury to order an *orata di ferri* not from the lagoon but from the free waters of the Adriatic, landed from one of those beautiful fishing smacks from Chioggia with their painted sails.

But what about the riches of the sea itself, the reader may wonder. We can all conjure up images of a Mediterranean jewelled with islands, its coastlines indented by harbours, those schools for mariners, an invitation to travel and trade. In fact the sea did not always in the past provide that "natural link" between countries and peoples so often described. A very long apprenticeship had to be served. Almost as daunted by the sea as later generations would be by the sky, primitive peoples did not risk taking to the waves in the Mediterranean until the twelfth and eleventh millennia B.C. at the very earliest, more likely the sixth and fifth (dates of which we are much more certain)—and even then it was a brave venture. But starting an apprenticeship does not mean attaining mastery all at once. Only with the third millennium B.C., if then, did fleets become of practical importance; in the second, effective trade became possible, and not until the first did ships sail out beyond the Pillars of Hercules on to the trackless waters of the Sea of Darkness.

So although they were attempted very early, these "haphazard voyages" did not become regular and civilized (though not always safe) shipping roads until very late in the day. While the network of maritime links was comparatively dense, it operated only on certain coasts, from certain ports. Crossings were mostly made across narrow stretches of the sea, or in one of the sea-basins into which the Mediterranean is divided and which acted as so many semi-insulated economies. "He who sails beyond Cape Malea," said a Greek proverb, "must forget his native land."

The Sicilian bar

As a result, the Mediterranean world was long divided into autonomous areas, only precariously linked. The entire globe is today far more united as between its constituent parts than the Mediterranean was in the age of Pericles. This is a truth one should never lose sight of even when contemplating the apparent tranquillity and unity of the Pax Romana. The plural always outweighs the singular. There are ten, twenty or a hundred Mediterraneans, each one sub-divided in turn. To spend even a moment alongside real fishermen, yesterday or today, is to realize that everything can change from one locality to another, one seabed to another, from sandbank to rocky reef. But the same is equally true on land. Yes, we can always tell that we are somewhere near the Mediterranean: the climate of Cádiz is quite like that of Beirut, the Provençal riviera looks not unlike the south coast of the Crimea, the vegetation on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem could equally well be in Sicily. But we would find that no two areas are actually farmed alike, no two regions bind and stake the vines the same way—in fact we would not find the same vines, the same olive-trees, fig-trees or bay-trees, the same houses or the same kind of costume. To understand the essentially dual character of Dalmatia, one would have to have seen the port of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) in February during the Feast of Saint Blaise, when the city was transformed by music and dancing, and thronged by men and women from the mountains. These differences have often only been partly created by geography. It is the historical past, persistently creating differences and particularities, that has accentuated these variations, leaving colourful traces which still delight us.

The unified image of the sea is in any case belied by some major contrasts. The north can never be taken for the south; *a fortiori* the eastern Mediterranean is not the same as the west. The Mediterranean stretches out so far along the parallels that the Sicilian bar bisects it rather than bringing the fragments together.

Between the south coast of Sicily and the low-lying shores of Africa, the sea is not very deep. It seems to heave up its bed: one more effort and a barrier would run from north to south. These shallow waters are signalled by the string of islands stretching from Sicily to the Tunisian coast with its coral and sponges: Malta, Gozo, Pantelleria, Lampedusa, Zembra, the Kerkennah islands, Jerba. I can remember flying from Tunisia to Sicily, or between Greece and Italy, in the days of flying-boats which took you low over the sea: you

could make out even the white edge of the Trapani saltmarshes in western Sicily, the shadows of the boats on the seabed close in to shore, and the channels of deeper blue water marking the surface currents. You could even see Corfu and the Gulf of Taranto at the same time! I always imagine the dividing line between the two Mediterraneans on this imaginary aerial map, made up of memories laid end to end. It is a line marked by some of the stirring episodes in Mediterranean history. But that is hardly surprising. North against south meant Rome against Carthage; east against west meant the Orient against the Occident, Islam against Christendom. If all the battles of the past were to be plotted together on the map, they would describe a long combat zone stretching from Corfu through Actium, Lepanto, Malta and Zama to Jerba.

History has demonstrated over and again that the two basins of the Mediterranean, the east and west, have been comparatively self-contained worlds, even if they have at times exchanged ships, commodities, people and even beliefs. In the end, the sea itself obliged them to co-exist, but they have always been quarrelling brothers, opposed to each other in everything. Even the sky and its colours look different either side of Sicily. The east is lighter: in a sea more purple than blue, or wine-dark as Homer called it, the Cyclades are patches of luminous orange, Rhodes a black mass, Cyprus a shape of intense blue. Or that is how I saw them, one afternoon, flying from Athens to Beirut. We may criticize progress, but if you want to see the Mediterranean, the best thing you could do as an introduction would be to fly over it on a clear day in a little plane which is not travelling too high or in too much of a hurry.

The Mediterranean at the heart of the Ancient World

Immense though the Mediterranean was if measured by the travelling speeds of the past, it has never been confined inside its own history. It rapidly outstripped its own borders, looking westward to the Atlantic, eastward to the Levant which was to fascinate it for centuries on end, south to the desert marches beyond the palm groves, north one way to the rolling Eurasian steppes that border the Black Sea, and north the other way to the slow-developing Europe of forests, beyond the traditionally sacrosanct northern limit of the olive tree. The life and history of the Mediterranean do not stop—as the geographer, the botanist or even the historian might have imagined—at the point where the last olive tree has been left behind.

It is in fact the major feature of the sea's destiny that it should be locked inside the largest group of landmasses on the globe, the "gigantic linked con-

continent” of Europe-Asia-Africa, a sort of planet in itself, where goods and people circulated from earliest times. Human beings found a theatre for their historical drama in these three conjoined continents. This was where the crucial exchanges took place.

And since this human history was in perpetual motion, flowing down to the shores of the Mediterranean where it regularly came to a halt, is it any wonder that the sea should so soon have become one of the living centres of the universe, and that in turn it should have sent resonant echoes through these massive continents, which were a kind of sounding-board for it? The history of the Mediterranean lent an ear to the distant sounds of universal history, but its own music could be heard from far away too. This two-way flow was the essential feature of a past marked by a double movement: the Mediterranean both gave and received—and the “gifts” exchanged might be calamities as well as benefits. Everything was in the mixture and, as we shall see, the brilliant arrival of the earliest civilizations in the Mediterranean can already be explained as the coming together of different elements.