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Gérard-François Dumont

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# **GEO STRATEGICS**

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**Mediterranean geopolitics,  
yesterday and tomorrow**

**G.-F. DUMONT**

# MEDITERRANEAN GEOPOLITICS, YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

By the Vice-chancellor Gerard-François Dumont \*

"The Mediterranean is not a border, but a place for trade". This sentence of Fernand Braudel may appear surprising insofar as the sea coasts constitute borders incomparably better marked than the terrestrial borders. In fact, the interface ground-sea is and has often been a determinant of political entities. And yet, it is true that through History, the Mediterranean has often been a space amply frequented in order to meet the needs for trade. In particular, it found itself in the heart of a civilisation of which Europe is the main heiress today. However, at the beginning of the XXIst century, the Mediterranean appears relatively marginalised compared to the large economic axes of Europe and the principal political decision places. Thus, the Mediterranean zones relative weight in sales networks, except tourism, seems marginal (1) and the development of the Mediterranean Southern and Eastern banks remains to be improved. Furthermore, the worry of taking into consideration Mediterranean geopolitics does not seem meaningful. Even the

European Union hardly concerns itself with the Latin arc. The European journalists inform us of the political tensions within the Indonesian archipelago; however the latter falls under a maritime surface considerably larger than that of the Mediterranean whose question of geopolitical balance is far from being clarified. The same Europeans look at the United States materialise a North-American free trade agreement associating two developed countries (the United States and Canada) with a developing one (Mexico) without imagining a Mediterranean free trade agreement.

If one wants to think of the possibility of a Mediterranean Common Market, it is not useless to put this nostrum pond into a historical perspective considering the Mediterranean geopolitical history until the end of the first millennial, period that we indicate under the old times formula, its posterior history having been more known in particular thanks to the work of Fernand Braudel.

The first question to be posed consists in studying the above mentioned

\* Professeur at the Paris-Sorbonne University

sentence veracity of the important historian for these old times (2) during which, a priori, man did not have the current techniques to dominate the sea. During the first century before J.C., in his Odes, Horace states the difficulty of the then Mediterranean navigation. Celebrating Virgile's departure for Athens, he underlines how much the unworthy sea, with its floods full of anger, was frightening. But, he adds, audacious to face them all human race broke all barriers (3).

Man thus surmounts physical obstacles which the Mediterranean represents, making with this one exert an essential role allowing exchanges between bordering territories and overcoming the frontiers effects that the sea provokes. And a few decades after Horace, the Mediterranean makes it possible for Rome to politically unify the whole set of bordering countries. At the beginning of the Christian era, the Mediterranean thus forms between the territories which border it a kind of Common Market or rather single market, according to the terminology used in connection with the European Union or of the European economic Space area. The Mediterranean becomes for the Romans the *pond nostrum*, our sea, thus an inland sea, an as much political than economic concept. Does this geopolitical place given to the Mediterranean, undeniable during the apogee of the Roman Empire, also noted at other historical periods? As it does not apply continuously in the ancient life of the Mediterranean, that means the existence of periods when, for lack of *pond nostrum*, it would be preferable to speak about *pond clausum*, sea clause, the Mediterranean being presented then

more in the form of a barrier than like a link.

Actually, the geopolitical history of the Mediterranean is discontinuous, oscillating between rather *pond nostrum* beneficial periods to populations living standards by the reciprocal enrichments permitted by trade, and others rather *pond clausum*, at the time of obscure moments not very favourable to the improvement of living conditions and having even recessive effects. Thus, this sea between the grounds, according to its etymology, has filled the functions of gate or barrier between its bordering people.

## TWO GREAT CIVILISATIONS LIMITS

Quite common to all bordering countries, small or large, which surround it, the Mediterranean appears initially as a limit historically. Because of the existence of powerful civilisations on Asian (Middle East) and African (East of Northern Africa) territory, it could have fulfilled a function of way towards the Occident as it shall be later, for Western Europe, the way toward the Orient, covered to seek luxury products, or in the Middle Ages, to procure oneself spices.

But Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilisations are primarily land: their expansion results in particular from an agro-pastoral revolution and clearing of the swamps, and is based on the invention and the use of oxcart, the beats donkey, or the wheel. For these civilisations, the sea is presented primarily in the form of a limit at their territory. Thus, Egypt is hardly present on the Mediterranean and Alexandria its large seaport, is founded

only in 332 before J.C. by the Greek colonists.

## **PHOENICIANS MARITIME ROLE**

Nevertheless, starting from III millennium before J.C., the maritime techniques and practices take their expansion with the Phoenician marine people and the Aegean world. Even if one cannot speak any more of pond clausum, one cannot use the expression of pond nostrum, or only while considering such or such Mediterranean subset. Indeed, the Mediterranean abounds in small size, narrow and partitioned maritime spaces. It is parcelled out in subsets organised in chains (the Adriatic, Aegean, the Ionian, the Tyrrhenian Seas), closed by islands (Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Balearic Islands, Aegean archipelago), or peninsulas (Iberian, Italian, Balkan). In the absence of a single pond nostrum, there is local pond nostrum in conformity with the geography of various civilisations. Thus, Knossos, Centre of Cretan civilisation, extends its maritime empire on the Aegean Sea and made peace reign there, in particular during its apogee, from -1700 to -1400 before J.C. In Greece, the Achaens (4), considered as Indo-European people, settled by driving back the Peloponnesians. They appear to be good sailors and their Aegean-Mycenaen civilisation (from -1580 to -1200 before J.C.), until the arrival of the people of the sea, Indo-European tribes, maintains trade relations with Crete, Egypt or Cyprus.

Previously, in the Eastern Mediterranean, Phoenicia created, as of the IIIrd millennium, a civilisation

directed towards maritime trade. Phoenicians explore the shores and inaugurate trade routes, becoming ship brokers of great powers. After the collapse of the Achaen empire of the Aegean-Mycenaen (5) in the XIIth century before J.C., that of the empire Hittite (Anatolia at the end of the XIIIth century) and while the Egyptian empire declines, the Phoenician brokers become the most active tradesmen of the Mediterranean. Tyre is the principal port of the Eastern Mediterranean and Phoenicians found Carthage - name indicating the new city - towards -814 before J.C. They install a series of stopovers from Egypt to the Gibraltar Straits. Each one is distant of about thirty kilometres hence a boat day. These stopovers are initially of simple anchoring. Then some become temporary barter counters and others permanent establishments. Phoenicians export glass-makings from Lebanon, structural timber (cedars), and even skilled labour. They import in particular money and tin from the Iberian Peninsula, as murex from which they draw purple.

## **GREEKS, THE MEDITERRANEAN MASTERS**

While the Tyre undergoes several dominations (Assyrian, neo-Babylonian, Persian) from the Vth to the IIth centuries before J.C., the colonists and Greek marines improve the art to navigate: they design more frayed ships, increasing the sail, and invent the anchor. They become the Masters of the Mediterranean dominated by two principal ports: Syracuse, founded in -734 by Corinthians, is essential like the largest

maritime city of the Mediterranean; then Piraeus, supplanting Corinth and Egeia, materialises the development of the maritime power of Athens. The Greeks export their maritime know-how then, for example in Massalia (Marseilles). This port, founded in -600 by Greeks originating from Phocae in minor Asia, becomes in the 1st Century the greatest Mediterranean tin trade centre, which comes from the Massif Central, the Armorican Massif, or British Cornouailles. Transported to Massalia, tin gains other Mediterranean areas. In exchange, the boats bring manufactured objects to Massalia: crockery, attic vases, jewels, salt, wine for which the independent Celts apparently expressed an immoderate taste (6). Following Greek colonisation, the vine growing is established in Gaul, but its production remains insufficient to satisfy the needs. Massalia thus redistributes the imported wine then produced in Gaul, even at long distances, as crater, and Wine cups (in Burgundy) prove it at the beginning of the Vth Century before J.C.

The expansion of Massalia is diffused on the Mediterranean coast, because Phocaeans scatter a series of colonies and counters between the Maritime-Alps and the Balearic Islands sea: Ampurias in Catalonia and Velia form with Massalia the principal Phocaeans commercial ports, although Massalia hardly has political influence. The force of the large Mediterranean ports rests on their capacities to fulfil some essential functions: initially, it is advisable to organise a good reception for the ships; then, the possibility of remaining in the port simplifies the tran-

shipments; that to offer naval carpenters in order to repair (and to build the boats beforehand) is invaluable; the capacity to be able to deliver drinking water on board is essential. In addition to the boat and navigators physical security which is naturally well imperative, trade security is just as necessary, which supposes rules making it possible to exchange goods and to be able to leave again with products whose importation is authorised. Trade security, is also the possibility of making benefit, which supposes bearable taxes and silver coining.(7)

### A HISTORICAL EXCEPTION

After having reduced the Athenian power, which had admittedly weakened from the interior, Rome realises this exceptional historical location, a State bordering the totality of Mediterranean banks. Three essential stages punctuate this construction of the pond nostrum. Yielded in Athens by the Romans into -166, Delos becomes an international warehouse and a cosmopolitan centre, symbolising Rome's maritime expansion. In -146, Carthage destruction removes a significant rival from the Romans in the Mediterranean. Finally, the Roman Senate makes an essential decision in 67 before J.C.: Pompey, elected Consul, manages to obtain extraordinary capacities (lex Gabinia) to fight pirates who act ruthlessly in the Mediterranean. In three months, killing or capturing 30 000 pirates, Pompey founds the Roman Command in the Mediterranean, signing the disappearance of piracy at least until the IIIrd Century after J.C. The Mediterranean becomes then the Romans pond nos-

trum, whose Empire embraces all the Mediterranean basin orbis terrarum. The imperial time sees the apogee of maritime life, even if, in winter, the pond nostrum is generally a pond clausum because of navigation high risks during this season.

As sea transportation is easier and more economic than land carriage, the Mediterranean stopovers form the Empire's principal transport network system. The merchant navy uses the sail as propulsion instrument, while the oar remains small fishing boats prerogative and the warships so often shown in the peplums. The port of Ostia, 24 kilometres from Rome, knows its apogee in the 1st century, and the large wearing of Marseilles, Narbonne or Frejus attest Rome's commercial monopoly in the Mediterranean. Frejus (7) founded precisely in the 1st Century before J.C., is quoted by Cicero, Strabon, Pline or Tacit. It is a time considered as the second Roman port after Ostia, because of its significant market and its stage character place on the aurelian way. To a hundred kilometres in the East of Frejus, one can admire one of the most extraordinary monuments dominating still today the pond nostrum: the Alps trophy of the or August trophy (8), 46 meters high, symbolises part of Roman geopolitics, the link established by the Roman Empire between France's and Italy's current territories and the passages security of the alpine south arc. It attests the pax romana reality, obtained thanks to Rome domination of forty-four alpine people whose names are engraved on the trophy. Turn-headlight realised in 13 before J.C. with progressive withdrawal

stages; this trophy is unique in the Mediterranean.

During this same time from the last century of the antiquity to the first of the Christian era, the Eastern Mediterranean, and more particularly the Holy City of Jerusalem, are connected to various Mediterranean banks (9), because Jews spread themselves on the Mediterranean circumference front, as after the destruction of the temple. Thus one finds Jewish centres with Ostia, Genoa, Bologna, Ravenne or Naples.

## **PIRACY RETURN**

The end of the imperial unit marks that of pond nostrum unity. The decline starts in Western Mediterranean, then Eastern Mediterranean, before remaining active and prosperous, closes itself little by little. On the one hand, the end of the Roman Empire adventures remove people from maritime customs and many populations become country and continental fellows. Moreover, the needs for maritime trade decrease considerably taking into account the Roman world depopulation (10).

On the other hand, piracy return is accentuated in the Vth Century, before being taken in hand by Islamists sailors, and hardly encourages the rise of maritime trade. The ports which made the vitality of the pond nostrum decline or disappear, under the double effect of the economic recession and of their incapacity to ensure trade safety as well on the sea side as on the ground side.

During the second half of the Christian era Ist millennium, the pond

nostrum leaves the place to a pond clausum. The acuity questions related to insecurity is highlighted, à contrario, by the two Mediterranean ports which end up emerging in the last part of the Ist millennium: they correspond to locations naturally protected from the aggressions of the continent and profit from a natural geography enabling them to supervise from afar the possible maritime aggressions. Venice, protected by its lagoon, starts to be organised with the election of a first doge in 697. One century later begins the conquest of a maritime empire in Istria and Dalmatia. In Campania, Amalfi, protected by precipice reliefs, becomes, as from the IXth century, a flourishing maritime Republic, before sharing its functions with other Western Mediterranean ports, like Pisa and Genoa.

### **THE MEDITERRANEAN, ALWAYS STARTED AGAIN**

Mediterranean geopolitical history alternates the worst and the best in its trade function and links between men. It remains primarily a pond clausum until men, Phoenicians, Greeks, then Romans manage to implement maritime techniques and know-how. During the time when the Mediterranean does not have on its local or regional circumference powers likely to ensure trade and transport safety, the Mediterranean tends to be a pond clausum. On the other hand, at each time and in each part of the Mediterranean where people's and goods' security reign, the Mediterranean reveals itself to be a significant trade fermenting agent, facilitating the rise of civilisations and contributing to improve

populations living conditions. Because goods and services trade is never exclusively commercial. It implies other cultural and linguistic exchanges. It makes it possible to local customers to grow rich in contact with other ways of life.

These elements of Mediterranean geopolitics knowledge can guide contemporary geopolitical reflections: couldn't the Mediterranean which was the centre of a Common Market during certain historical times become it in XXIst Century? Couldn't that favour a balanced development of the whole set of bordering countries? This simple idea seems all the more realisable that the Mediterranean seems to be a rather favourite maritime space today, since it does not seem to undergo or to suffer much less from piracies than others like the southern China Sea, or, to a lesser extent, the North Sea.

The association of part of the neighbouring countries on the Northern Mediterranean in the European Union should be supplemented by a multilateral association of the whole set of Mediterranean countries with the European Union. So that the powers bordering the Mediterranean are aware of the importance of this stake, it would be appropriate that they acquire a geopolitical, economic, and ecological vision making the contemporary reality of a common pond nostrum obvious. The Mediterranean cultures played an essential role in the formation of Western civilisation and are in the heart of European identity roots (11). More recently, industrial revolution was done outside of it, taking into account the location of new sources of energy then

put into exploitation. But, in the XXIst century, the industrial era economic localisation constraints are null and void, and nothing prevents from thinking of the Mediterranean like a peaceful trade link between the three continents.

Undoubtedly in this objective it is necessary to have the courage of restarting, by remembering the formula of Paul Valéry in "the marine cemetery: Sea, sea, always started again!" ■

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