

## **Cultural development in the Mediterranean basin as perceived by the shaping of built form**

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The Mediterranean basin, as a geographical, political and economic entity, has been the cradle for the development of the most infamous civilizations of mankind. It thus provided the ground for formal and informal networks to develop and become concretized in built form. Throughout the ages, people have been moving in and around the basin; shrines, castles and even entire cities have been founded, have flourished and at times have been left to deteriorate as migration of people and ideas have been passing the Mediterranean, as indeed any other geographical entity, with consecutive layers of space and meaning. The paper attempts to provide a quick overview of some important yet not easily perceived aspects of the basin's cultural development and especially the manner in which they are reflected on built form over the centuries. The aim of the approach is to deepen and improve the understanding of the man-environment relationship in a manner directly relevant to the intricacies of the Mediterranean basin.

From the very beginning it has been clear that although the sea may often be conceived as a barrier leading to isolation, many places along a coast may have been more easily accessible by boat rather than by road. History has shown that maritime transport has proved to be at least equally if not more preferable for moving both people and goods. As early as before the 1st millennium BC, the Phoenicians followed by the Greeks, in search of new productive or simply commercial horizons, have been attracted by distant Mediterranean locations and have been interested in expanding their influence either by conquering existing settlements or by establishing new ones.

Eventually both Phoenician and Greek influence spread evenly across the basin, often transcending distances of more than a week's boat travel. In this manner, areas that were located far away from the place of origin had been provided with an opportunity to become accustomed with elements of their civilizations, thus setting the basis of a Mediterranean network. Cultural exchange tended to work both ways, benefitting both the colony and the motherland. An indication of what was to follow was given by Greek mythology such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Jason and the Argonauts' Quest for the Golden Fleece, that were characteristically based on what appeared as endless navigation through a network of very different places still typically located along the Mediterranean coast. Even Homer's *Iliad*, that chronologically preceded the *Odyssey*, signified the interest of Achaeans from mainland Greece, themselves being earlier settlers from the north, to expand eastwards across the Aegean Sea and to establish a network with Troy.

The agony of earlier generations to sell their products, to pursue better living conditions, and often to exploit their political power has tended to be reflected on their artifacts, the manner in which they built their strongholds and their new cities. Similarly and even more unmistakably this process is made evident by the generations and civilizations to follow, such as the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Ottomans and so on. The paper further focuses on specific layers of meaning that have been embedded in the built environment through the ages and reveal the approaches of different civilizations towards specific functions. The examples pertain to issues such as the signification of the Athenian Parthenon as compared to the Roman Pantheon as well as the manner in which the Greeks built their theaters as this is differentiated from the Roman approach.

Undoubtedly the areas adjacent to the Mediterranean basin share similar characteristics in terms of geomorphology, climate and primary sector production potential. Although people may differ in terms of religions, beliefs and motivation, history has shown that the elements that unite them tend to be stronger than those that set them apart. Following Braudel's idea, the image of a Tunisian Arab cultivating his land bears little difference to that of a Spaniard or a Serb. Based on this similarity, it has been apparent that the movement of people and goods, as well as the exchange

of attitudes and philosophies, are prone to sustain the development of formal and informal networks the expressions of which often tend to be concretized in built form. Depending on the characteristics of its production and contemporary context, these forms clearly embody the potential to operate as strong heritage signifiers and mediate the ideology that sustained the networks behind them.

This paper has not been concerned with contemporary Mediterranean networks. Still it has been apparent that already established networks are threatened by political turmoil in areas like the Middle East, in Cyprus and Serbia earlier and more recently in Libya, Egypt and Syria. With migration currently at its peak, in a context that has already been hit by a structural economic depression, it is not unlikely that the Mediterranean basin may experience dramatic changes that will affect the manner in which its people view and shape their immediate milieu.

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