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Mediterranean networks and the shaping of built form: a quick overview

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Abstract

The Mediterranean basin, as a geographical, political and economic entity, has 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 of these networks and to focus on a number of the least obvious aspects of their reflection on built form. 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

Key words: *Mediterranean Networks, Built Environment, Mediterranean Cities.*

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to provide a quick overview of some of the formal and informal networks that have emerged and developed in the Mediterranean basin and to focus on a number of the least obvious aspects of their reflection on built form. 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 specific territory.

The Mediterranean basin, as a typical geographical, political and economic entity, has 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, sometimes isolated but in most cases in groups. 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 horizontal and vertical layers of space and meaning.

2. The Early Antiquity

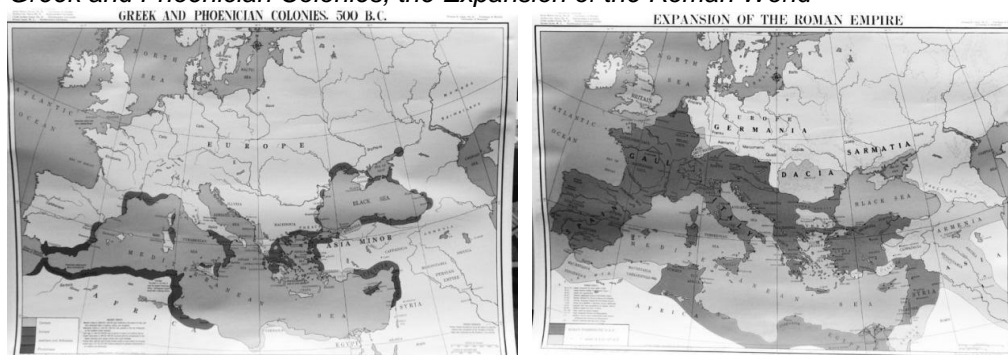
From the very beginning it has been clear that although the sea may often be conceived as a barrier leading to isolation, many places along the Mediterranean coast have tended to be more easily accessible by boat rather than by road. History has shown that maritime transport has proved to be at least equally if not more preferable for moving both people and goods. Thus as early as before the 1st millennium BC, it has been the Phoenicians followed by the Greeks who, 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 (Aubert & Turton, 2001, and Edwards, 2000).

Eventually both Phoenician and Greek influence spread evenly across the basin, often transcending distances of more than a week's boat travel (Fig. 1). 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's 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.

Figures 1 & 2

Greek and Phoenician Colonies; the Expansion of the Roman World



Phoenicians, being mostly interested in trade, established their main colony, Carthage, in a setting located strategically in the opposite side of their place of origin and near the center of the Mediterranean basin. The new colony operated as a stronghold that eventually dominated the northwestern African and part of the Spanish coast. A number of centuries later, the Romans approached the Mediterranean basin in a very different manner; they expanded their authoritarian rule along the entire Mediterranean coast, generally including the mainland. It is the first time in history that the basin functioned as a lake, governed by what has been called 'Pax Romana', or 'Roman Peace'. It is of no wonder that Pax Romana would have never been achieved unless the Punic Wars, i.e. the continual warfare between Romans and Carthaginians, were settled in favor of the first in 146 BC (Fig. 2).

3. The Classical Period

Nonetheless, more than seven centuries before the establishment of the Roman Empire and a few centuries after the Phoenician trade flourished, the Mediterranean basin experienced intense waves of Greek colonialism which was chiefly directed towards its extensive northern coast. The interesting element in this activity was that ancient Greece has never been united as a nation and for this reason such ventures were in fact organized by different city-states not only acting independently but often in a state of overt antagonism. Thus the responsibility and sometimes the control of specific colonies were distributed among different Greek city-states. It is important to note that networking

for Greek colonies has tended to be dynamic rather than stable as it fluctuated between cooperation and open warfare, as in the case of Athens attacking and eventually being defeated by its colony Syracuse in 414 BC (Dunbabin, 1948; Smith et al, 2000; Cameron, 1993).

An interesting paradigm of the relation between homeland and colony may be observed in the case of Akragas, located near the Sicilian modern city of Agrigento. For quite some time, the city of Akragas has been the most prosperous Greek colony in the west, noted for the extravagance of its people. Its spectacular Valle dei Templi is a fairly extensive site of seven monumental 5th century BC Doric temples, located along a ridge between modern Agrigento and the neighboring port of Porto Empedocle, that dominate the scenery (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, the poor quality of the local stone could not sustain the tremendous height of most of its edifices, the result being that most temples are in ruins, a fact that clearly demonstrates the colony's intention to surpass the glory of its motherland (Fig. 4).

Figures 3 & 4

Agrigento, Temple of Zeus; Agrigento, a 20m high Telamon pillar in ruins



It is therefore apparent that the intensification of colonization and commercial exchange in the Mediterranean basin has led to the development of formal and informal networks the reflections of which are often concretized in built form as in the case of the ruined structures in Akragas. Mother city civilization is reflected in artifacts, buildings and culture, as in the case of the 5th century BC Athenian amphora found in a Roman villa in Silves, southern Portugal, thus providing a measure of the differential influence of Greek and Roman cultures and signifying the omnipotence of Mediterranean networking for the specific period (Archeological Association of the Algarve, 2012).

Another interesting paradigm of the unexpected influence that such networks might embody has been manifested in Segesta, a non-Greek speaking Elimian city in Southwestern Sicily. Although Segesta has always been in a territory under strong Phoenician influence and hence hostile to the Greek culture, it is decorated by a very

interesting Greek temple built in Doric style which was never completed although currently unexpectedly well preserved.

At this point a special mention is due to the networks created by Alexander at a period immediately preceding the Roman Conquest. Although Alexander's interests led him to Persia rather than the Mediterranean, it would be an omission not to mention the Macedonian networks established along the Mediterranean coast and above all, the city of Alexandria itself that was brought to fame not only by its renowned Library but also by the relation of Cleopatra and the Roman oligarchy a few centuries later (Bosworth, 1993).

Nevertheless the Mediterranean networks established by Greeks and Phoenicians has not been as strong as those established by Romans who had been constructing shrines, civic buildings, let alone the renowned Roman infrastructure, in every new territory they conquered. As the basin reached an unsurpassable political peak during the period of the Roman conquest, its wider catchment area was covered with Roman structures and edifices, whether altars and porticos or even the mere stonework of the Appia and Egnatia roads. This continual production of manmade environment not only supported their needs as invaders and served their troops but above all conveyed their supremacy to the barbarian locals. In the case of Romans, artifacts were required to 'speak' and to tell everybody how strong the Empire was and for this reason they were asked to operate as strong signifiers of the Roman rule.

It is very interesting to compare the built form produced by Romans to that produced by Greeks nearly five centuries before, as there are striking differences between Roman and Greek civic architecture, mostly relating to the clarity of their basic features (Sapounakis, 1985). The articulate classic forms of Greek monuments that related to the local city-state communities were succeeded by pompous declamatory symbols which typically aimed to be easily decoded and more importantly to impress the much wider populace of the Roman Empire. The juxtaposition of the Athenian Parthenon, even without the elaborate sculptures of its frieze, and the Roman Pantheon, built several centuries later, is enough to elucidate this point (Figs. 5-6).

Another example relates to the theater and is important both because of the significance of Greek and Roman drama for the respective societies but also as a sizeable number of theaters were constructed by both civilizations across the Mediterranean basin. It is interesting to note that a parallelism, similar to the one underlined above, is found when comparing the actual expressive character of Greek to Roman drama as the latter tends to be more overt and theatrical than the former (Green, 1994).

*Figures 5 & 6**The Parthenon in Athens; The Pantheon in Rome*

Furthermore, Greek theaters as structures were approached in a completely different manner compared to Roman ones. Ancient Greek theaters, like the one in Syracuse (Fig. 7), blend well with their environment, not being constructed as independent freestanding structures but taking advantage of hillsides. As they were generally located near the coast, their orientation was carefully planned so that prose could be acoustically better as the evening coastal breeze carried the voices of actors to the audience. On the other hand, Roman theaters, like the theater of Marcellus in Rome, were constructed as detached buildings, in contrast to their context. In this manner they tended to function as landmarks for their specific location rather than allowing their surroundings to dominate the landscape (Fig. 8).

*Figures 7 & 8**The ancient Greek theater in Syracuse; The ancient theater of Marcellus in Rome*

4. After the Romans

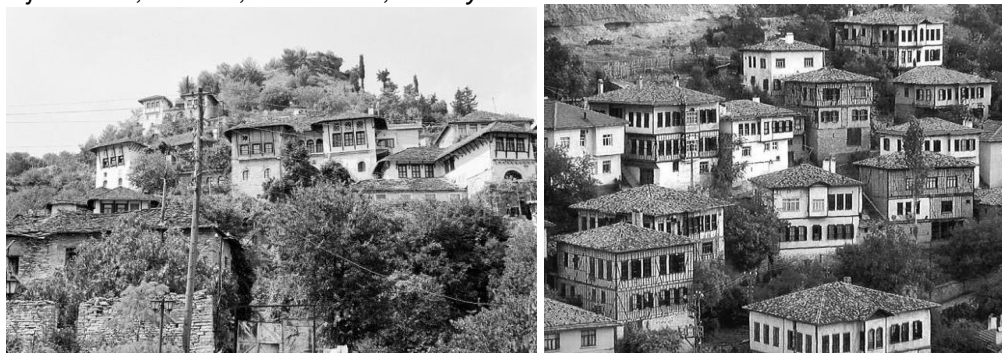
The magnificence of Pax Romana that expressed the unification of the whole Mediterranean basin under the same political rule, allowing multitudes of formal and informal networks to develop and become reflected on built form, has never been surpassed since then. In a sense it was only attained again once, i.e. under the rule of Byzantine Emperor Justinian a few centuries later. Still even then, it did not cover the coast of Spain in the western part of the basin and had not been so consistent as to bear an equally strong hand in networking and building construction (Haldon, 2000; Mango, 1984).

Similarly the influence of Islam, either as the expansion of the influence of the Arab world (Holt et al, 1970; Foster, 2004; Hattstein & Delius, 2004) or of the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the East (Goodwin, 1971; Mantran, 1984), although mostly expressive in built form in the case of Spain and to an extent along the Balkan peninsula, it has not been particularly strong in Italy. However informal networks inspired by Muslim ideas flourished and led to the employment of arabesque architecture in many parts of the basin. A measure of the informal influence of Islam in the Mediterranean is given by the word for 'olive', probably the most important product throughout the basin, which is similar in Spanish, *aceituna*, as it is in Turkish, *zeytin*, two countries that are located so far apart. Equally impressive is the fact that the Greek city Lamia was known as *Zitouni* during the Turkish 15th-19th century occupation, due to its extensive olive groves, even though the specific word means nothing in Greek.

Movement of people along the Mediterranean basin either by necessity or by will has been a fairly common phenomenon throughout the ages and has been observed to take place more dramatically in several occasions as in the case of the Crusades, the migration of Jewish communities East and West, the commercial dispute of Venice and Genoa over the Eastern part of the basin and lastly the Barbary raids of the 17th and 18th centuries that influenced strongly the way of building in many northern parts of the Mediterranean. A special mention is lastly due to the British naval supremacy in the basin, mainly established by their naval colonies Gibraltar, Malta and Cyprus, as well as to the attempt of Italian fascists to a revival of Pax Romana, in the name of *Mare Nostrum*, after conquering Libya, Albania and a sizeable part of Greece at the beginning of WWII.

In as much as the Greek territory is concerned, it is important to note the manner in which the influence and the once strong bonds to the country's Latin west are reflected in the form of many buildings, especially churches and campaniles even in remote islands of the Aegean archipelago following the Crusades and the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 (Georgopoulou, 2001). Moreover, elements of strong informal networks are apparent in the form of vernacular Balkan architecture, in which chiefly Albanian builders who have built Gjirokastra, southern Albania, have influenced the imagery of many villages in mainland Greece (Fig. 9). It is interesting to note that the same style of building is also evident in places such as Safranbolu in Turkey (Fig. 10).

Figures 9 & 10

Gjirokastra, Albania; Safranbolu, Turkey

5. Contemporary Mediterranean and Perceptions of the Future

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 (Braudel, 1990), 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.

In view of the above, the aim of the present paper has been to unfold the manner in which elements of a specific economic, social and political environment may be transferred through formal and informal networks to another geographical context and

are identified as having been concretized in built form. The few examples mentioned are intended to show that Mediterranean civilizations, as indeed any civilization, have produced forms that are not always as simple and straightforward as they appear. Their shaping is not only a matter of the specific actor, user and conjuncture engaged in their production but also involve a much wider signification sustained by complex layers of past and present networks that are seldom overtly expressed and decoded. As the built environment being loaded with meaning, may be taken as operating as an endless text, it is this paper's ambition on the one hand to encourage researchers to go deeper into the man-environment relationship and on the other hand to allow designers to attain a better understanding of what is invested in their creations through them.

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