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# INDICE

FROM THE EDITORS	7
INTERVIEW WITH LEILA SIMONA TALANI	9

## ARTICLES

MARIANA STARKE AND THE GRAND TOUR IN EUROPE, ITALY, AND SICILY BETWEEN THE EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH CENTURY <i>Paolo Militello</i>	13
LEBANON AND EGYPT: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A VITAL SPACE IN WOMEN'S WRITING <i>Laura Restuccia</i>	33
RELIGIOUS RIPPLES ON THE BOSPORUS. MEDITERRANEAN HISTORY AS AN ANALOGY FOR THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY <i>KULTURKAMPF</i> IN IDA HAHN-HAHN'S <i>EUDOXIA</i> <i>Paul Csillag</i>	49
«TO DO GOOD AND LOVE ONE'S COUNTRY». THREE ITALIAN POETESSES DURING THE RISORGIMENTO <i>Elena Frasca</i>	71
A POSTMODERN 'NEW' WAVE? WOMEN AND THE GENDERING OF SEASCAPE IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CINEMA <i>Antonio D'Amico</i>	87
(RE)COLLECTIONS OF A "PICCOLA STREGHINA" FROM THE HEART OF THE MEDITERRANEAN: GENDER AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN GRAZIA DELEDDA'S FOLKLORIC WRITINGS <i>Elena Emma Sottilotta</i>	109

MOTHERHOOD AND THE 'NDRANGHETA IN <i>LA TERRA DEI SANTI</i> <i>Veronica Vegna</i>	131
INTERVIEW WITH SARAH ABREVAYA STEIN	151
BOOK REVIEWS	157
CONTRIBUTORS	165

*States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean. Perspectives on the New Centrality in a Changing Region*, Francesca Maria Corrao and Riccardo Redaelli (eds.), Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. ISBN: 978-3-030-68999-5. Pp.354.

A decade ago, David Abulafia pointed out that anyone who intends to study the history of the Mediterranean faces a fundamental problem: how to avoid reducing such history to the mere history of the regions bordering this basin? The same question, moreover, is also valid for all large homogeneous geographical areas experiencing large movements of populations, trade routes and cultural exchanges, such as the Baltic Sea or the Sahara Desert. To overcome this difficulty, Abulafia proposed a focus on the Mediterranean strictly as a maritime reality: the sea seen therefore as a place of trade, migration and battles; the port cities that overlook it as centers of coexistence between different identities, whose relationships oscillate between cultural tensions and the development of a Mediterranean *koiné*. This ambivalence is well represented by Smyrna at the beginning of the eighteenth century: here the presence of the European communities had pushed the Turkish community to learn to assimilate, learning the languages and the customs of the former, while, at the same time, the powerful voices arising from Christian churches and taverns which generated the resentment of the local population, who interpreted such gestures as signs of disrespect.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretative key can also be useful to analyze the Mediterranean in our present times. Indeed, the seas are still physical places of vital importance for global geopolitics. Over 80% of world trade takes place by sea,<sup>2</sup> while the seabed is crossed by the precious infrastructure that supports the internet and – indirectly – the world economy: submarine cables through which almost all international data traffic is transmitted.<sup>3</sup> In this light, the importance of the Mediterranean depends on its nature as a basin that connects the Indo-Pacific region with the Atlantic, constituting a marine buffer between the North and South of the world. For this reason, although the

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1 David Abulafia, «Mediterranean History as Global History», *History and Theory* 50, fasc. 2 (2011): 220-28; Daniel Goffman, *Izmir and the Levantine World, 1550-1650*, Publications on the Near East, University of Washington, no. 5 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990).

2 UNCTAD, *Review of Maritime Transport 2021* (United Nations, 2021).

3 Submarine Cables: Critical Infrastructure for Global Communications, [itif.org](http://itif.org); Submarine Cable Map, [submarinecablemap.com](http://submarinecablemap.com). Consultato il 30 settembre 2022.

global competition between Washington and Beijing has concentrated in recent years in the Pacific, the ancient *Mare Nostrum* finds itself once again at the center of great commercial strategies.

The volume edited by Corrao and Redaelli is an excellent guide through these complexities. It was born from the synergy of Italian scholars who – through different disciplinary perspectives – shared their contributions, starting with a seminar organized, at the end of 2019, by the Master Program in Economy, Law and Institution of the MENA Countries (Luiss University of Rome) and by the Center for Research on the Southern System and the Wider Mediterranean (Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan). Consequently, the collection of essays included in this book focuses on the balances and tensions that run through the Middle East and North African shores of the basin, while effectively framing these case studies in a broader geopolitical framework – the European neighborhood policy, the growing Chinese penetration – and within of a long-term historical perspective.

This contextualization is particularly useful for deconstructing the image that paints the MENA countries as condemned to a social and cultural backwardness without the possibility of redemption, prey to a violent and radical Islam – irreducibly “other” – a narrative that has become particularly popular in Europe after the 2008-2011 economic crisis, to support the rejection of migratory flows from the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

It is undeniable that the MENA area is today extremely fragmented, plagued by widespread corruption and a patriarchal culture that digs the furrow of already deep social and territorial inequalities. Yet, it should be noted that this state of affairs was preceded by a millenary parable at whose initial point the balances were radically different: in the tenth century, the Arab world – albeit already differentiated internally – dominated the Mediterranean. As the dense excursus by Francesca Maria Corrao points out (pp. 3-44) for centuries the Islamic culture guarded the mathematical, astronomical and philosophical knowledge of the Greek and Indian civilizations, before the Ottoman Empire closed itself to the innovations of the XV-XVI century – namely the press and the modern scientific method – in a climate of growing opposition with the European powers. However, the slow decline of Constantinople and the history of the political entities that followed the disintegration of the Empire is punctuated by ambitious breaths of reform: the Ottoman *Tanzimat* and the Egyptian modernization of the mid-nineteenth century, the adherence of post-colonial leaders to the models of development of the Cold War – socialism or liberalism, the currents of critical Islam, which are highlighted in the essay by Mohammed Hashas (pp. 129-156).



The position of women in today's societies in MENA countries reflects perhaps better than any other aspect this persistent tension between conservation and progress, stasis and development. The theme is analyzed in the contribution of Ersilia Francesca (pp. 157-173), who underscores the persistence of social and formative imbalances capable of hindering the participation of women within the labor market. Despite the efforts made in the last twenty years by the governments of the region to promote women's education, a significant fraction of women over the age of fifteen are illiterate or poorly educated, especially in rural areas. Moreover, this condition is fueled by a "gender paradox" for which less qualified women find work more easily than those who receive tertiary education. This labor mismatch affects the young population transversally, as it derives from the distortions of the production systems of the region – often not very diversified and unable to provide jobs at the level of advanced training – it is reflected even more on women due to political and cultural reasons: legal, fiscal, and welfare systems structured on the model of the male breadwinner, which reinforce the still widespread belief that women's work is socially acceptable only if it does not question domestic and family care tasks. Consequently, women's participation in the labor market equates to low-skilled, underpaid, and irregular jobs.

The most original aspect of this essay consists in analyzing the importance of microcredit to overcome these obstacles. In North Africa, women have become privileged recipients of microfinance tools for at least two reasons: on the one hand, in fact, gender disparities make it more difficult for women to access ordinary credit; on the other hand, compared to men, women show greater reliability in repaying loans and a greater propensity to invest capital in activities useful for family well-being, with generally positive effects on entrepreneurship and – consequently – female independence. Of course, microcredit cannot be the only answer to gender inequalities in the labor market, in the MENA area. However, as the author suggests, this activity performs an enabling function for women's empowerment: microfinance institutions are able to reach women who – especially in rural areas – do not have access to essential health and social services and basic information on their sexual and reproductive health; they promote cooperation between women to achieve common goals and increase their influence in society. This is, of course, a fundamental requirement to achieve significant changes also in other legislative matters in which the effectiveness of current policies has proved largely insufficient, such as the fight against sexual abuse. The gender gap in North Africa and the Middle East, therefore, intertwines all the main divides within this region: between

urban and rural territories, religious fundamentalism and glimmers of secularization, authoritarian elites, and democratic demands. The recurring waves of popular mobilization – 2011 and 2019 – have restored the image of a society that is anything but static and hostile to change.

The main merit of the volume consists precisely in questioning binary contrasts between the societies that populate the different shores of the Mediterranean. It is essential to recognize the ferments that shake the latter and to identify the limits of the cooperation models adopted in the past between the European Union and MENA countries. The new global centrality of the basin cannot ignore the relaunch of this dialogue.

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*Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean.* Sara Parks, Shayna Sheinfeld, Meredith J.C. Warren. New York: Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-138-54378-2. Pp. 370.

*Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean* is a well-needed resource for undergraduate courses pertaining to women's religious and leadership roles, as well as women as readers and writers of scriptures, in Judaism and Christianity, through a period that spans from the conquest of the Mediterranean by Alexander the Great (323 BC/BCE) to the reign of the Roman emperor Constantine I (357 AD/CE). Moreover, it is to note that the authors, as stated in one of their recent interviews, wanted to approach the question of methodology; they "wanted to be deliberate about promoting conscious use of methods as early as possible" and wanted their "readers... to pay more attention to marginalised experiences wherever we can find them in antiquity. We want them to imagine alternatives to the normative expectations of elite men from the various traditions."<sup>4</sup>

The book is divided into ten chapters, with the first two providing the tools necessary to investigate thoroughly and impartially through, first and foremost, the basic understanding of concepts of history, gender, texts, evidence, reading, the ancient Mediterranean world, and ancient religious

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4 <https://www.shilohproject.blog/jewish-and-christian-women-in-the-ancient-mediterranean-new-book/> (Nov 2021)

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