

Construire la Méditerranée, penser les transferts culturels. Approches historiographiques et perspectives de recherche

Veranstalter: Research group FranceMed at the German Historical Institute of Paris (Rania Abdellatif, Yassir Benhima, Daniel König, Elisabeth Ruchaud)

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As a part of the activities organised by the research group FranceMed (La France et la Méditerranée. Espaces des transferts culturels), the German Historical Institute in Paris hosted the first of a cycle of four conferences on processes of cultural transfer in the medieval Mediterranean, partially financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Dealing with different concepts, definitions and approaches, the conference aimed at offering an insight into the many ways of analysing and interpreting the Mediterranean.

Following a presentation of the group's activities and objectives, NIKOLAS JASPERT (Bochum) discussed the potentials and risks involved in Mediterranean studies from four different angles – a spatial perspective, a transcultural and comparative approach, research with an emphasis on different forms of cohabitation transgressing cultural or religious borders („convivencia“), finally the political perspective of fostering international research on the area. On the one hand, Jaspert pointed to the possibilities inherent in research working with conceptual tools such as connectivity, frontier zones, third spaces, oases and hubs, networks, imagined spaces, mental maps, micro-ecologies, transcultural comparison, communication, and gave a short overview over different Western European initiatives to promote Mediterranean studies. On the other hand, he emphasised the dangers brought about by essentialism, euro-centrism, but also by ascribing a unique character to the area, by equating divergent phenomena, by moralising or concentrating on 'successful' cohabitation while neglecting tensions and conflicts. Finally, Jaspert

cautioned against losing sight of intracultural phenomena in a political and academic atmosphere that accentuates the need of inter- and transcultural studies.

CHRISTOPHE PICARD (Paris) began by outlining a maritime history of the Mediterranean based on the idea of an economic rupture between the North and the South after the Arab conquest, a concept created by Henri Pirenne and developed by later historians. Picard distinguished three phases: The Mediterranean in crisis (8th to 10th centuries), the rise of the Umayyads and Fatimids as maritime powers (10th century), and a period of Latin domination (from the 11th century onwards). On the basis of textual and archaeological material Picard underlined that political and economical ruptures did not necessarily take place at the same time. The lack of Arabic sources and the predominance of a Latin perspective of Mediterranean maritime history had created the image of mainly land-based Muslim powers only marginally involved in maritime activities executed in large part by „buccaneers“. This interpretation of a Mediterranean dominated by Muslims only for lack of Latin activity has been revised by recent scholarship which also emphasised that economic relations continued to exist even in phases of important political transitions. Defining Islam's position in the Mediterranean, Picard underlined the activities of Muslim rulers.

Playing with the different meanings of the word 'Mediterranean' by using examples from different oceans and seas, JAN RÜDIGER (Frankfurt am Main) pointed out that traditional medieval research concentrates on continental empires and rather neglects the maritime dimension of political power represented by thalassocracies. Evoking different historical examples of maritime empires, Rüdiger discussed the definition of this Greek term as well as the characteristics of a political structure with no or hardly any continental basis. Emphasising the fluidity of maritime rule described as a political system characterised by „un sens de l'espace qui ne connaît pas le lieu“, Rüdiger stressed the necessity of adapting the interpretation of certain phenomena linked with continental power structures (territory, frontiers, fiscal systems, exploi-

tation of natural resources) to the characteristics of thalassocracies. Rüdiger concluded that an absolute thalassocracy, a „maritoire“ without a continental basis can only exist in the imagination.

JENNY OESTERLE (Bochum) provided an insight into German medieval research on the Mediterranean. Pointing to the fact that Germany has no direct connection to the Mediterranean, Oesterle stated that German medieval research had, until recently, maintained a clear distinction between the histories of Europe, Africa and Asia, allocating the responsibility for extra-European regions to the respective area studies. According to Oesterle, traditional German medievalism only dealt with Mediterranean phenomena either if they procured a contrast to or had an impact on inner-European developments. The histories of Byzantium or the Islamic world, for example, only figured in medievalist interpretations when sources referred to direct contacts or overriding events such as the crusades demanded an explanation of realities beyond the European sphere. Oesterle emphasised, however, that recent research on cultural transfer, networks, connectivity, transcultural phenomena as well as comparative studies have contributed to opening traditional medievalist research to new extra-European fields of inquiry. Medieval sources themselves provided many examples which could serve as a starting point to comparative research. Oesterle emphasised the importance of the latter as a methodical approach when dealing with periods of low connectivity.

YASSIR BENHIMA (Paris) examined the role of techniques in general and their transfer in particular as they are dealt with in historiography on the Mediterranean. Pointing to the methodological limits of certain general syntheses on the history of techniques, he emphasised the importance of specific economical studies undertaken under the influence of the Annales school, notably the works of Lombard and Ashtor. After having given an overview over the main topics dealt with extensively during the last few decades (hydraulics, agricultural techniques, fire arms, automats, paper), he underlined the necessity of carefully examining different forms of reception and contextualisation of certain techniques

rather than only concentrating on the mechanisms of their diffusion. He furthermore emphasised the importance of differentiating between erudite culture and practical technical knowledge.

PHILIPPE SÉNAC (Toulouse) traced the main developments of research on frontier phenomena in the Iberian peninsula of the Middle Ages. Beginning by demonstrating the complexity of terminological issues in this context, Sénac divided the history of Iberian frontier zones into three periods: Chiefly used as a place of refuge in the 8th and 9th centuries, they witnessed a demographical upsurge in the 10th and 11th centuries to be characterised by moving military fronts between the 12th and the 15th centuries. Because of their mobility, mapping these frontiers was impossible. In view of this and thanks to archaeological research as well as to the transfer of the North American understanding of frontier zones (East-West) to the Iberian Peninsula (North-South) several studies had been published which focus on frontier societies and their organisation. These studies treat a variety of aspects such as the prevailing economy of war, demographic structures, and the central powers' involvement in frontier affairs. Sénac also pointed to topics that still await study such as interior and maritime frontiers in the Iberian context, the permeability of frontier societies, relations with the enemy as well as the role of cities.

ABBÈS ZOUACHE (Lyon) pointed to the different conditions for historical research in the Arab world, Israel and the Western world which resulted in differing, and occasionally ideologically grounded approaches of sensitive subjects such as the crusades. Zouache presented an anti-imperialist and anti-zionist tendency in Arab research that depicts the crusades as the aggressive act of a colonialist Occident while at the same time emphasising the role of certain heroic figures such as a Saladin defined as liberator. Israeli research, in turn, evolved in a way that it tended to focus more and more on a kind of 'national' history that sometimes interprets the crusades as a justification of Israel's existence and a prefiguration of zionism. Turning to Western research, Zouache described a trend to explain the crusades as a religiously motivated ex-

pression of medieval Latin expansionism while at the same time downplaying theories that define the crusade as a process of colonialisation or an act of vengeance.

JOCELYNE DAKHLIA (Paris) began by analysing the reasons that impeded to think of the Mediterranean as an area of „métissage“. Evoking the historical and terminological origins of this concept habitually used to describe the fecund encounter of separate entities, she opposed two fundamental interpretations of the Mediterranean – either an area built on common anthropocultural fundaments („socle méditerranéen commun“) or an area characterised by cultural fractures („Méditerranée des fractures“). Citing numerous examples, Dakhliia brought to mind archetypes of métissage in early modern Mediterranean history (religious minorities, renegades, captives). In this context, she pointed to the fact that traditional research has often applied the concept of métissage only to representatives of European Christianity, seemingly excluding Muslim societies. Dakhliia continued to cite numerous recent studies which fill this gap and open up new tracks of research in various fields (history of the sciences, material culture, literature, linguistics). Dakhliia concluded with a description of the theological obstacles to a fertile intermixture (métissage) of Islam and Christianity and pointed to the colonial origin of the concept of „métissage“.

According to PIERRE BONTE (Paris), modern anthropology has not formulated a „Mediterraneanism“ comparable to „Africanism“ or „Americanism“. The reasons for this were to be found in the very close relationship between historical and anthropological research in the Mediterranean region opposed to other cultural spheres who, characterised by orality, are not as accessible to historical scrutiny. In France, Mediterranean anthropology developed in connection with history. Here historical anthropology was especially used in Hellenistic studies on mythology, polytheism, sacrificial rituals, ritual groups etc. Stimulated by functionalism, British anthropology on the Mediterranean had, in turn, remained rather independent from history by concentrating on topics such as honour and rural communities without clearly defining the Mediterranean as

a distinct cultural sphere. Finally, Bonte presented general topics dealt with by anthropological research dealing with the Mediterranean (structural permanences, questions of genre, métissage), mentioning several compilations on parental structures, different forms of violence or religiosity in different Mediterranean contexts.

ISABEL SCHÄFER (Berlin) dealt with current topics discussed by European policy-makers as regards the Mediterranean. Schäfer traced the development of an explicitly Mediterranean policy from its beginnings to the present day: Starting point was the European-Arab dialogue in the 1990s which included the coordination of economic policies and defined the Middle East and North Africa as one region (MENA). It was followed in 1995 by the Barcelona process and the European partnership featuring a first concept of regional integration and free trade. The project of a Union for the Mediterranean, envisaged in 2007 as a political and economical cooperation between the countries bordering the Mediterranean, was realised in 2008 as a wider union of 44 partners. Within the framework of this overview, Schäfer raised different questions concerning the role of civil society, the equilibrium between bilateral relations and multilateral partnership as well as several policy efforts to define the outlines of a common Mediterranean culture. She concluded with a description of different scenarios including the reversion to the fragmented state of bilateral politics, the development of a genuine political union or the pursuit of alternative forms of integration emphasising economic or security aspects.

Concluding, the group FranceMed formulated several questions linked to the general topic of the conference. Terminological issues played an important role, not only in regards to historical denominations for the Mediterranean but also in view of the problems encountered when searching for a translation or equivalent of specific terms and concepts used by representatives of the various academic traditions. This again led to questions concerning the range and importance of the concept of „cultural transfer“. To be able to understand, describe and measure the complexity, interdependence and intensity of intercultural con-

tacts in the Mediterranean the simultaneous use of different methodological approaches seemed necessary. The final discussion dealt with „ecological“ interpretations of historically defined areas, the role of islands in this context as well as different methods to exploit historical sources.

Thanks to many contributions of high quality, intensive participation and lively discussion, the conference provided the possibility to bring together different visions of the Mediterranean, to juxtapose the perspectives of medieval scholars and perspectives cultivated in other periods and disciplines. By dedicating much space to current discourses as well as to problematic aspects of terminological usage and methodological forms of approach, the conference furnished a basis for further reflection on processes of cultural transfer in the medieval Mediterranean which will be pursued in the upcoming second conference on actors of cultural transfer.

Konferenzübersicht:

FranceMed (Paris): Présentation du groupe de recherche

Nikolas Jaspert (Bochum): Mediterranean Research. Relevance, Prospects and Risks

Christophe Picard (Paris): L'historiographie de la Méditerranée médiévale: une histoire confisquée?

Jan Rüdiger (Frankfurt): Thalassocraties médiévales: pour une histoire politique des espaces maritimes

Jenny Oesterle (Bochum): The Mediterranean in German Medieval Research

Yassir Benhima (Paris): Quelques aspects de l'historiographie des transferts techniques en Méditerranée médiévale

Philippe Sénac (Toulouse): Historiographie de la frontière en Péninsule ibérique

Abbès Zouache (Lyon): Ecrire l'histoire des croisades aujourd'hui, en Orient et en Occident

Jocelyne Dakhlia (Paris): Lieu et liens historiographiques d'une pensée du métissage en Méditerranée

Pierre Bonte (Paris): La Méditerranée des an-

thropologues: Permanences historiques et diversité culturelle

Isabel Schäfer (Berlin): La réinvention d'un espace – concepts politiques pour la Méditerranée

FranceMed (Paris): Conclusion

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