

Eyüp Özveren, Filiz Yenişehirlioğlu, Tülin Selvi Ünlü (eds.), *Mediterranean Port Cities: Connectivity in Modern Times*, Springer, 2023, 256 p., ISBN 978-3-031-32325-6.

The volume *Mediterranean Port Cities* is a dense and layered collection that explores the role of Mediterranean port cities between the modern and contemporary ages, combining urban history, economic exchanges and migratory phenomena. The result of the Silk Cities project, the work reflects a transdisciplinary and extended geographical perspective that links cities such as Smyrna, Alexandria, Volos, Beirut, Barcelona, Mersin, Thessaloniki and Rethymno in a single dynamic network. The cities analyzed are presented as strategic nodes within transnational trade networks, fueled by the combination of modern infrastructures such as ports, railways, banks and historical legacies.

The essays highlight how the transformation of ports such as Alexandria, Mersin, Smyrna or Volos in the 19th century were favored by the intensification of maritime exchanges, urban modernization and the presence of cross-border economic actors. To cite some cases examined in the volume: Alexandria, Egypt, for example, was characterized by multi-confessionalism, exponential growth thanks to the opening of the Suez Canal and the centrality of the cotton trade and the presence of Greek, Italian, Jewish and Levantine communities. Izmir, on the other hand, was one of the centers of Ottoman trade and was characterized by a strong Greek, Armenian and Jewish presence, representing a meeting point between the East and the West. Kaya shows how Izmir was a concentrate of the Mediterranean, where ethnic coexistence was as necessary as it was fragile, held together by shared mercantile interests rather than by a political ideology of tolerance. During the nineteenth century, Izmir established itself as one of the main commercial ports of the Ottoman Empire. Its port was one of the busiest in the eastern Mediterranean, thanks to the export of agricultural products such as raisins, figs and cotton from the Anatolian hinterland.

The essay highlights that Smyrna served as a hub for a transnational network of trade that linked Anatolia to Europe, especially Marseille and Trieste, and to the Near East. While Beirut was a city characterized by its port expansion, strong social mobility and cosmopolitanism. Özveren's essay stands out for a historical-cultural approach that combines urban history, collective memory and economic dynamics, presenting the city as one of the most paradigmatic examples of precarious modernity in the Eastern Mediterranean. Beirut is described as a city suspended, on a tightrope between East and West, between the Ottoman past and national aspirations. In the 19th century, Beirut transformed

from a secondary Ottoman center into a strategic port of the Levant, overtaking competing cities such as Saida or Tripoli. Its rise was mainly due to three very important factors: the silk trade with Europe, especially with France; the modernization of the city through the construction of the railway that connects it to Damascus; and finally the intervention of the European powers who use Beirut as a bridgehead to penetrate the Arab and Ottoman markets.

Mersin, analyzed by Tülin Selvi Ünlü, presents itself as a unique case of modern port urbanization, not the result of a long historical stratification like Smyrna or Alexandria, but created *ex novo* in the 19th century as a response to the commercial needs of the Ottoman Empire. From the mid-19th century, Mersin developed as an agricultural port for the export of products from the fertile Çukurova region, especially cotton and wheat. Its foundation and growth are closely linked to the increase in exports to Europe and its inclusion in international trade routes. Although less known for cosmopolitanism than Alexandria or Beirut, Mersin hosted Armenians, Greeks, Turks, workers from the Anatolian hinterland and Jews in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, social plurality was subordinated to commercial logic and interethnic relations were built around economic cooperation rather than cultural mixing. Mersin also represents a significant example of internal Ottoman migration, which attracted labor from the surrounding countryside, especially seasonal workers and workers for the port infrastructure and, unlike Smyrna or Beirut, it is not a city of large international diasporas, but of economic mobility functional to the port.

The volume documents the key role of ports in the Mediterranean economy through the analysis of goods such as cotton, tobacco, cereals, trading companies and financial institutions such as Levantine banks and branches of the Bank of Athens. Economic interconnection is reflected in the urban structure, with the birth of commercial districts, customs warehouses, railway lines and urban networks functional to the circulation of goods and capital. One of the most original sections of the volume concerns the relationship between economic mobility and human migration.

Elena Frangakis-Syrett's essay stands out in the volume for its methodological accuracy and the originality of the perspective adopted, focused on the family trajectories, diasporic networks and transnational ties that shaped the urban and port economy between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The author reconstructs the history of Greek families from islands such as Chios, Psara and Lemnos, who settled in Alexandria in Egypt and other cities of the Nile Delta (Minya, Asyut), and then actively participated in the Levantine trade networks. Frangakis-Syrett adopts a microhistorical approach that combines archival sources, family letters, commercial data and memorial testimonies.

This method allows us to grasp the connection between economic mobility and social capital, showing how diasporic belonging is not a factor of marginalization, but a resource for competitive insertion in Mediterranean markets. The families analyzed operate as intermediaries between local production of cotton, oil, cereals and international markets, constituting a transnational merchant bourgeois class. The port of Alexandria thus becomes the physical and symbolic place of the intersection between economic capital, cultural capital and diasporic identity.

The author insists on the adaptive capacity of these groups: although not fully integrated into the Egyptian context, they develop hybrid strategies, maintaining strong ties with metropolitan Greece, the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe. One of the main merits of the essay is to highlight the function of the port as a mobility interface, not only for goods but also for people, information and identities. The family networks studied show how the connection between the cities of Alexandria, Smyrna, Marseille, London gives rise to a diasporic Mediterranean geography that challenges the categories of the nation-state and territorial citizenship. Frangakis-Syrett contributes to debunking an exclusively macroeconomic reading of port cities, underlining the importance of social history and urban microdynamics.

In this sense, her contribution fits into the best tradition of studies on the Greek diaspora, renewing its interpretative approaches and placing them in the context of nineteenth-century globalization. These flows are exemplary of economic migrations that saw port cities as privileged destinations for diasporic communities in search of opportunities. Migration is read not only as physical movement, but also as a form of cultural and familial connectivity, through kinship and business networks that extended from London to Smyrna, from Alexandria to Constantinople. The cosmopolitan dimension of these cities—as also emerges in the essays on Beirut and Thessaloniki—was the product of a continuous interaction between heterogeneous religions, languages, identities and economic activities.

Despite the dynamism of Mediterranean ports, the volume also highlights the structural fragility of these urban systems. Economic and social connectivity, although fundamental for survival in an uncertain environment, was constantly exposed to failures, political crises or geopolitical transformations, as the example of the decadence of Jaffa in favor of Tel Aviv shows. War, decolonization and the birth of nation-states have often disarticulated historical networks of exchange and coexistence.

This precariousness of connectivity is also manifested in spatial and symbolic terms, with cities that, like Alexandria or Smyrna, lose centrality in favor of

new global geographies, turning into places of memory and diasporic nostalgia. *Mediterranean Port Cities* provides a complex and multifaceted narrative of Mediterranean port cities as hybrid spaces, economically interdependent and culturally plural. Migrations, trade and urban transformations are analyzed as intertwined processes, linked to the logic of global modernity and the historical specificity of the Mediterranean.

The volume *Mediterranean Port Cities: Connectivity in Modern Times* is configured as a fundamental contribution to the historical and geographical interpretation of the Mediterranean port cities between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It proposes an interdisciplinary perspective, in which economic, urban, cultural and social analyses are intertwined, restoring the complexity of an urban space that is not only physical but also symbolic, continuously reconfigured through commercial networks, migratory flows and political projections.

One of the main merits of the volume is that of overcoming the teleological narrative of linear urban development, showing instead the discontinuous, fragmented and often contradictory nature of Mediterranean connectivity. Port cities are not presented as isolated or homogeneous entities, but as nodes of multilevel networks that connect empires, national states, diaspora and global capitalism. They represent liminal and porous spaces, in which experiences of mobility, marginality, resistance and cultural hybridization are deposited. The structure of the volume allows for a comparative reading that highlights the peculiarities of each context, but also the recurrences and affinities that link, for example, the diasporic cosmopolitanism of Alexandria to the mercantile plurality of Smyrna, or the functional urban planning of Mersin to the industrial infrastructure of Volos. Beirut emerges as an emblematic case of a fragile and contested urban modernity, capable of integrating local traditions and global pressures. In each of these cities, the port becomes a metaphor and an engine: an economic space and a symbolic device, an infrastructure and a threshold, a place of opportunity but also of exclusion.

From a methodological point of view, the work stands out for its ability to combine micro and macro scales: from the family stories of Greek migrations reconstructed by Frangakis-Syrett to the critical reading of the processes of urban gentrification, passing through the analysis of commercial infrastructures, banking institutions and architectural transformations. Attention to the materiality of urban space is accompanied by a profound sensitivity to the immaterial dimensions of memory, identity and collective representation. Ultimately, *Mediterranean Port Cities* is not just an atlas of maritime cities, but a choral reflection on the Mediterranean as a mobile, stratified and continuously

negotiated space. The volume invites us to consider port cities not only as economic actors or logistical nodes, but as historical subjects with agency, capable of influencing and being transformed by global processes.

Due to the richness of the sources, the variety of case studies and the analytical depth, the work imposes itself as an essential reference for anyone dealing with urban history, migrations, Mediterranean studies and territorial transformations in the modern and contemporary age

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