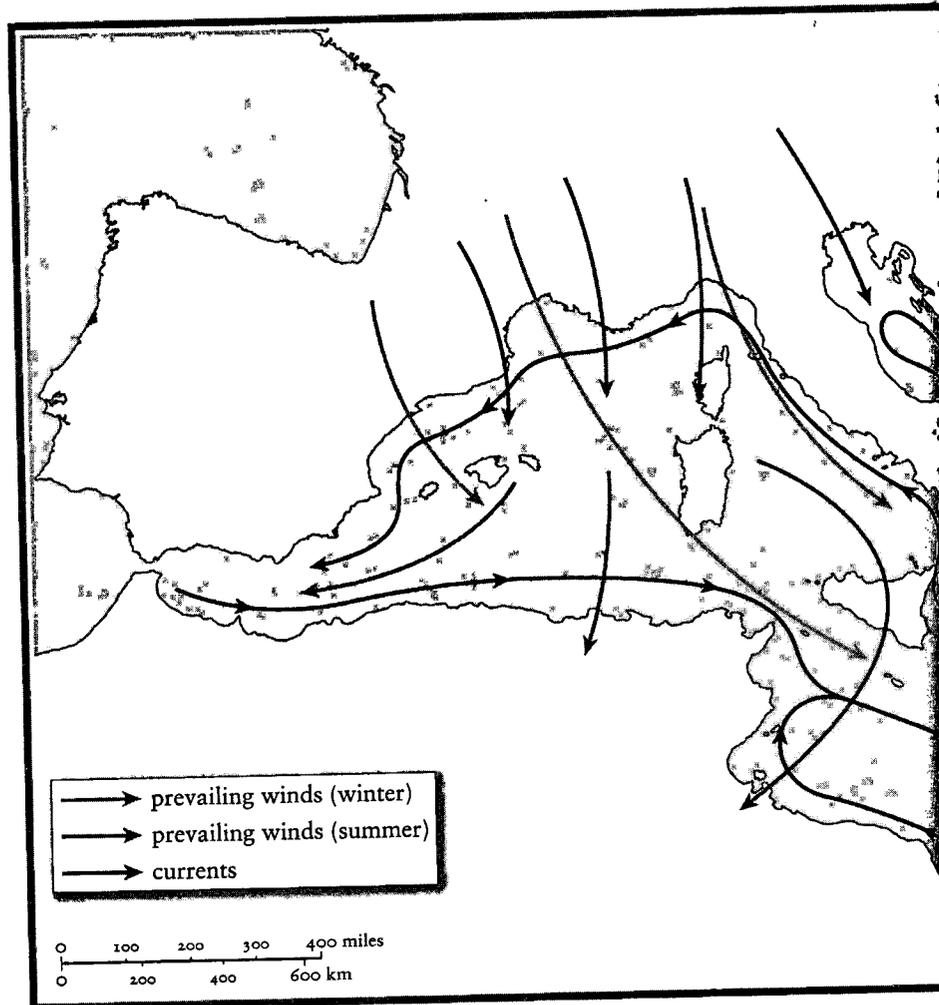


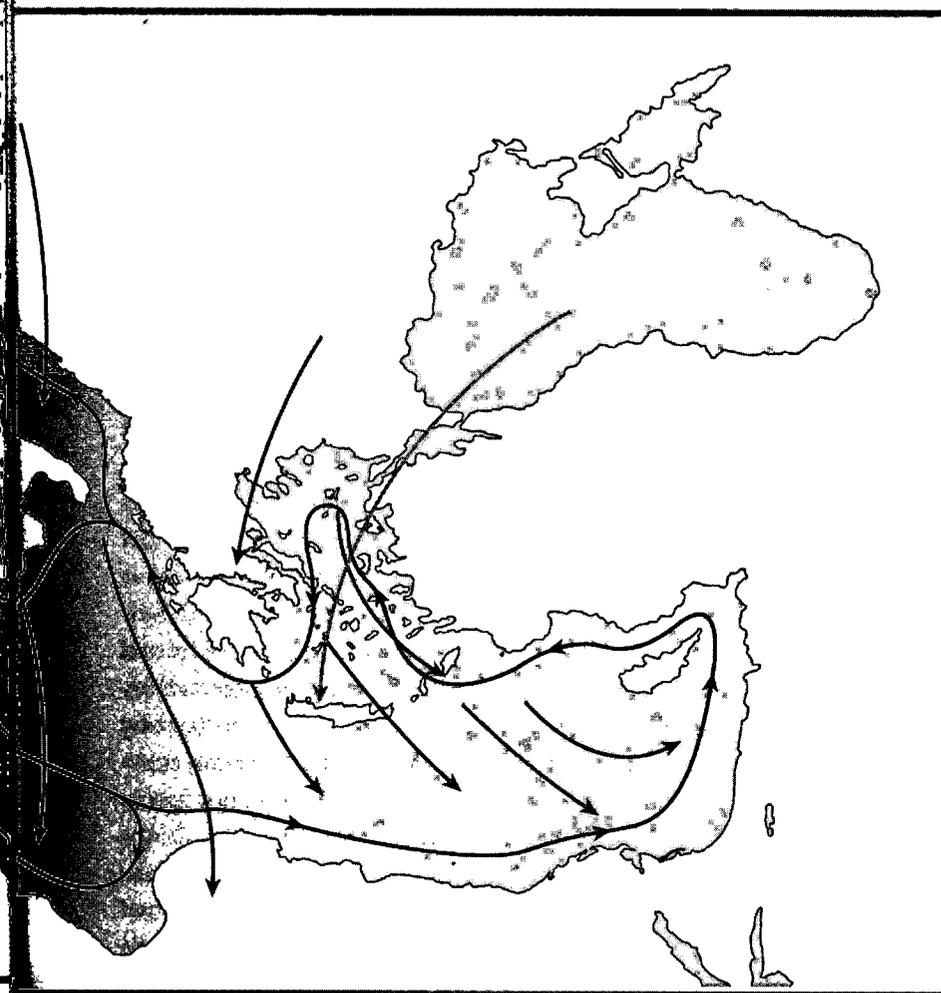
Introduction: A Sea with Many Names

Known in English and the romance languages as the sea 'between the lands', the Mediterranean goes and has gone by many names: 'Our Sea' for the Romans, the 'White Sea' (*Akdeniz*) for the Turks, the 'Great Sea' (*Yam gadol*) for the Jews, the 'Middle Sea' (*Mittelmeer*) for the Germans, and more doubtfully the 'Great Green' of the ancient Egyptians. Modern writers have added to the vocabulary, coining epithets such as the 'Inner Sea', the 'Encircled Sea', the 'Friendly Sea', the 'Faithful Sea' of several religions, the 'Bitter Sea' of the Second World War, the 'Corrupting Sea' of dozens of micro-ecologies transformed by their relationship with neighbours who supply what they lack, and to which they can offer their own surpluses; the 'Liquid Continent' that, like a real continent, embraces many peoples, cultures and economies within a space with precise edges. It is important, then, to begin by defining its limits. The Black Sea washes shores from which grain, slaves, furs and fruit were exported into the Mediterranean since antiquity, but it was a sea penetrated by Mediterranean merchants rather than a sea whose inhabitants participated in the political, economic and religious changes taking place in the Mediterranean itself – its links across land, towards the Balkans, the Steppes and the Caucasus, gave the civilizations along its shores a different outlook and character to those of the Mediterranean. This is not true of the Adriatic, which has participated strongly in the commercial, political and religious life of the Mediterranean, thanks to the Etruscans and Greeks of Spina, the Venetians and Ragusans in the medieval and early modern period, and the businessmen of Trieste in more modern times. In this book, the boundaries of the Mediterranean have been set where first nature and then man set them: at the Straits of Gibraltar; at the Dardanelles, with occasional forays towards Constantinople since it functioned as a bridge between the Black Sea and the



White Sea; and at the littoral running from Alexandria to Gaza and Jaffa. And then, within and along the Mediterranean, this book includes the port cities, particularly those where cultures met and mixed – Livorno, Smyrna, Trieste and so on – and the islands, mainly when their inhabitants looked outwards, which is why the Corsicans have a lower profile in this book than the Maltese.

This is perhaps a narrower vision of the Mediterranean than has been supplied by other writers, but it is surely a more consistent one. The subject-matter of books on Mediterranean history has been the history of the lands around the Mediterranean, allowing, naturally, for



some attention to the interaction between these lands. Two works stand out prominently: Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's massive *Corrupting Sea* of 2000 is especially rich in ideas about the agrarian history of the lands bordering the Mediterranean, assuming that a history of the Mediterranean should include land bordering the sea to a depth of at least ten miles. They demonstrate some fundamental features of Mediterranean exchange: the 'connectivities' linking different points, the 'abatements' when contraction occurred. But, in the last analysis, they are essentially concerned with what happens on land rather than on the surface of the sea itself. And then, looming over all historians of

the Mediterranean, lies the shadow of Fernand Braudel (1902–85), whose book *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, first published in 1949, was one of the most original and influential works of history composed in the twentieth century. From the 1950s onwards, Braudel guided the researches of many dozens of scholars not just on the history of the Mediterranean in his chosen period, but earlier and later periods too, and not just of the Mediterranean but of the Atlantic and other seas; and in his latter days he reigned with dignity and distinction over the highly respected *Annales* school of historians from his base at the mysteriously named ‘sixth section’ of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris. But his ideas had germinated slowly. French intellectuals such as the esteemed poet and essayist Paul Valéry, who died in 1945, had become fascinated with the idea of a ‘Mediterranean civilization’ shared among the French, the Spaniards and the Italians, present both on their native shores and in their colonial possessions in North Africa and the Middle East. Braudel’s book was the product of lengthy rumination in France, Algeria, Brazil and German prisoner-of-war camps, during which Braudel made an intellectual journey from the close study of past politics that still engaged many French historians, through the Mediterranean identities postulated by Valéry, to the writing of history informed by geography. Showing encyclopaedic mastery of the history of the entire Mediterranean, not just in the sixteenth century, Braudel offered a novel and exciting answer to the question of how the societies around its edges have interacted. At the heart of Braudel’s approach was his assumption that ‘all change is slow’ and that ‘man is imprisoned in a destiny in which he himself has little hand’.¹ This book suggests the opposite in both cases. Whereas Braudel offered what might be called a horizontal history of the Mediterranean, seeking to capture its characteristics through the examination of a particular era, this book attempts to provide a vertical history of the Mediterranean, emphasizing change over time.

Braudel showed what almost amounted to contempt for political history, understood as ‘events’ (*histoire événementielle*).² The geography of the Mediterranean was seen to determine what happened within its boundaries. He consigned politics and warfare to the very end of his book, and its real strength lay elsewhere, in its understanding of the landscape of the lands around the Mediterranean, and of important characteristics of the Mediterranean Sea itself – its winds and currents,

which helped determine the routes people took to cross it. In fact, Braudel’s Mediterranean extended far beyond the sea to encompass all the lands whose economic life was somehow determined by what was happening there: he managed at various points to bring Cracow and Madeira into his calculations. In his wake, John Pryor has laid a strong emphasis on the limitations imposed by winds and currents, arguing that medieval and early modern navigators found it difficult to navigate along the North African shore, and emphasizing the importance of the open season between spring and autumn when it was possible to sail the sea backed by suitable winds. Against this, Horden and Purcell have suggested that sailors were prepared to carve out additional shipping lanes where the winds and currents were less favourable, but where other interests – commercial or political – drew them along their new routes.³ The forces of nature could, then, be challenged with skill and ingenuity.

The physical features of this sea certainly cannot be taken for granted. The Mediterranean possesses several features that result from its character as an enclosed sea. In remote geological time it was entirely closed, and between about 12 and 5 million years ago evaporation reached the point where the Mediterranean basin became a deep and empty desert; once breached by the Atlantic, it is thought to have been flooded with water in a couple of years. It loses water through evaporation more rapidly than river systems feeding into the Mediterranean are able to replace it, which is not surprising when it is remembered how puny some of the rivers are: the little rivers of Sicily and Sardinia, the historic but not substantial Tiber and Arno (the Arno becomes a trickle upriver from Florence in high summer). It is true that the Mediterranean draws down water from the massive river system of the Nile, and the Po and the Rhône also make some contribution. Among European rivers, the Danube and the Russian river systems make an indirect contribution, because the Black Sea draws in water from several great arteries stretching deep into the landmass. The result is that the Black Sea has an excess of unevaporated water, creating a fast current that rushes past Istanbul into the north-eastern Aegean. But this only compensates for 4 per cent of the water loss in the Mediterranean, and the principal source that replaces losses by evaporation is the Atlantic Ocean, which provides a steady inflow of cold Atlantic water, to some extent counterbalanced by an outflow of Mediterranean water which (because of the evaporation)

is saltier and therefore heavier; the incoming water rides on top of the outgoing water.⁴ The fact that the Mediterranean is open at its ends is thus crucial to its survival as a sea. The opening of a third channel, at Suez, has had more limited effects, since the sea route passes through narrow canals, but it has brought into the Mediterranean types of fish native to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

The inflow from the Atlantic deterred medieval navigators from making a regular passage out of the Straits of Gibraltar, though it did not deter Vikings, crusaders and others from entering the Mediterranean. The major currents follow the coasts of Africa eastwards from Gibraltar, swing past Israel and Lebanon and around Cyprus, and then round the Aegean, Adriatic and Tyrrhenian Seas and along the French and Spanish coasts back to the Pillars of Hercules.⁵ These currents have had a significant impact on the ease with which ships have been able to move around the Mediterranean, at least in the days of oar and sail. It has even proved possible, tacking back and forth, to use the currents to sail in the face of the Mediterranean winds. The weather systems in the region tend to move from west to east, so that the winds could be profitably exploited to carry shipping in spring from the ports between Barcelona and Pisa towards Sardinia, Sicily and the Levant, though the major influence in the western Mediterranean during winter is the north Atlantic weather system, while in the summer it is the Atlantic subtropical high, stationed over the Azores. Wet and windy weather in the winter is characterized by the mistral bringing cold air into the valleys of Provence, but it has many close cousins such as the *bora* or *tramontana* of Italy and Croatia. John Pryor has pointed out that the 'Gulf of the Lion' off Provence is so named because the roar of the mistral resembles that of a lion.⁶ No one should underestimate the unpleasantness or danger of a winter storm in the Mediterranean, despite the modern image of a sun-drenched sea. Occasionally low-pressure weather systems develop over the Sahara and are dragged north as the unsettling wind known as the *scirocco* (Italy), *xaloc* (Catalonia) or *hamsin* (Israel, Egypt); vast amounts of red Saharan dust may be dumped on the lands surrounding the Mediterranean. So long as ships relied on sail power, the prevailing northerly winds endangered navigation along the coast of North Africa, for they threatened to throw ships on to the sandbanks and reefs of the southern Mediterranean shores, while (as Pryor has also observed) the steeper inclination of most of the

north Mediterranean shores made them much more attractive to navigators, as did their coves and beaches; however, these coves were also a long-standing temptation to pirates in search of a nook or cranny.⁷ Passage from west to east, the famous Levant trade of the Middle Ages, was easier for ships setting out from Genoa or Marseilles in the spring and following the northern shores of the Mediterranean, past Sicily and Crete and around Cyprus to reach Egypt; it was not standard practice to cut across from Crete to the mouth of the Nile until the coming of the steamship. Of course, one cannot be completely sure that the winds and currents have remained the same. Yet there are enough references in classical and medieval sources to such winds as the *Boreas* from the north-west to make it clear that the *bora* has a very long history.

Changes in the climate could have important consequences for the productivity of lands close to the Mediterranean, with a knock-on effect on the trade in Mediterranean grain, which was so important in antiquity and the Middle Ages and then lost its primacy. A cooling of the climate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries helps explain why grain lands went out of cultivation and why imports of grain from northern Europe became surprisingly common, strengthening the hand of Dutch and German merchants in the Mediterranean. Desiccation of coastal regions may suggest climate change, though here, importantly, the human hand is often visible: in North Africa new waves of Arab invasion in the eleventh and twelfth centuries may have resulted in neglect of dams and irrigation works, so that agriculture suffered. Economic decline in Asia Minor during the period of the late Roman Empire was accentuated by the abandonment of vines and olive terraces that had held in place soil which now washed down into rivers and silted them up.⁸ In modern times, dams, notably the Great Aswan Dam in Upper Egypt, have changed the pattern of flow of water into the Mediterranean, with effects on currents and humidity. It is man who has altered the seasonal cycle of the Nile, decisively changing the economic life of Egypt and putting to an end the annual floods which the ancient Egyptians attributed to their gods. On the other hand, the geographer Alfred Grove and the ecologist Oliver Rackham have suggested that human beings have had a less drastic effect on the Mediterranean environment than is often assumed, for nature in the Mediterranean lands shows a capacity to recover from climatic and other variations, and from the abuses imposed on it. Humans, they stress, do not determine the

evolution of climate, or at least did not do so before the twentieth century; and erosion, even allowing for a human role, also takes place naturally – it happened in the age of the dinosaurs too. One area where human impact has often been reported is deforestation, which has had severe effects in Sicily, Cyprus and along the Spanish coast; demand for timber for ships has been succeeded by the clearance of land for new or expanding towns and villages, but here too an argument can be pressed that natural regeneration has often taken place. Grove and Rackham are less optimistic about the future the Mediterranean faces, as water resources and fish stocks are over-exploited and, in some areas, desertification threatens, likely to be rendered worse if credible prophecies about global warming are even partly valid.⁹ To look back at the history of the Mediterranean is to observe a symbiosis of man and nature that may be about to end.

This book does not deny the importance of winds and currents, but aims to bring to the fore the human experience of crossing the Mediterranean or of living in the port towns and islands that depended for their existence on the sea. The human hand has been more important in moulding the history of the Mediterranean than Braudel was ever prepared to admit. The book is full of political decisions: navies setting out to conquer Syracuse or Carthage, Acre or Famagusta, Minorca or Malta. Why some of these places were strategically important did depend to a significant extent on geography – not just wind and waves but other limitations: fresh food and water might last a couple of weeks on a merchant vessel, but were too bulky to load in great quantities on a war galley that had little space to spare. This simple fact meant that control of the open sea was a very tough challenge, at least in the age of sail; without access to friendly ports where supplies could be taken on board and ships could be careened, no power, however many warships it possessed, could lord itself over sea routes. Conflicts for control of the Mediterranean thus have to be seen as struggles for mastery over its coasts, ports and islands rather than as battles over open spaces.¹⁰ To manage the almost constant threat of piracy it was often necessary to enter into murky deals with the pirates and their masters, permitting free passage to merchant shipping in return for gifts and bribes. Advance positions were invaluable. The situation of Corfu ensured that it was coveted over many centuries by those who sought to control entry into the Adriatic. The Catalans and then the British constructed a line of

possessions across the Mediterranean that served their economic and political interests well. Oddly, though, the places chosen as ports often provided poor harbours: physical advantages were by no means the only consideration. Alexandria was difficult of access through often choppy seas, medieval Barcelona offered little more than a beach, Pisa nothing but a few small roadsteads close to the Arno estuary, and even in the 1920s ships reaching Jaffa had to unload out at sea. The harbour at Messina lay close to the rushing waters of what classical commentators identified as the twin terrors of Scylla and Charybdis.¹¹

Human history involves the study of the irrational as well as the rational, decisions made by individuals or groups that are hard to understand at a remove of centuries or millennia, and that may have been hard to understand at the time those decisions were made. Yet small decisions, like the flutter of a butterfly's wings, could have massive consequences: a pope's speech at Clermont in France in 1095, loaded with vague but impassioned rhetoric, could unleash 500 years of crusades; disputes between rival Turkish commanders, in contrast to charismatic leadership on the Christian side, could bring surprise defeat upon Ottoman armies and navies, as at Malta in 1565 – and even then Spain was slower to send aid than the emergency demanded, risking loss of command of the waters around one of its prize possessions, Sicily. Battles were won against the odds; the victories of brilliant naval commanders such as Lysander, Roger de Lauria and Horatio Nelson transformed the political map of the Mediterranean and frustrated the imperial plans of those in Athens, Naples or Napoleonic France. Merchant princes placed their own profit above the cause of the Christian faith. The roulette wheel spins and the outcome is unpredictable, but human hands spin the wheel.