

“Teaching the Medieval as Mediterranean: Reorienting the Metanarrative”
An American Historical Association Roundtable Webinar (23 March 2021)

Fred Astren

Department of Jewish Studies, San Francisco State University

1. Roundtable topic: *The logistical challenges of teaching a course on the medieval Mediterranean.*

The Mediterranean is a space, whose geographical, climatic, and environmental particularities introduce fragmentation and untidiness to its medieval history. Its pelagic and littoral perspectives challenge traditional notions of state formation, military power, and economy, even identity formation. The following comments emerge from thinking about the Mediterranean as a space, and address some logistical teaching matters that arise from the map.

§ *The tyranny of cartography.* Students come to my medieval Mediterranean history class with general



Sabine Réthoré's incredible flipped map
of the Mediterranean (2011)

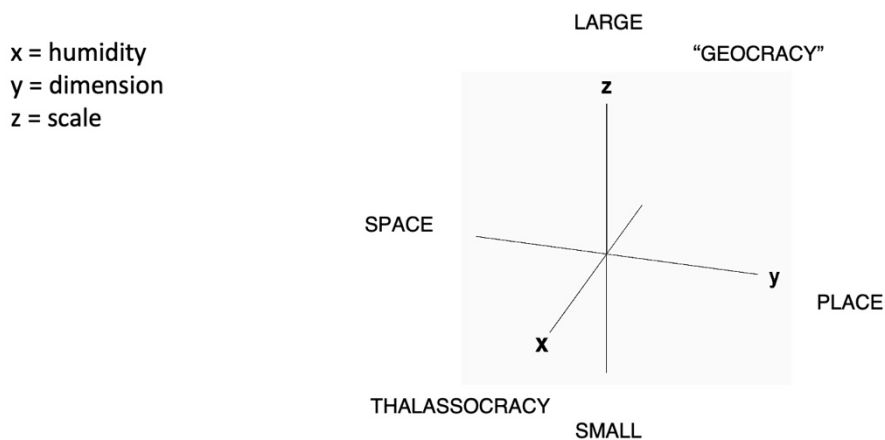
notions of what a map is and how maps work, but often without a mental map of the Mediterranean. Among the first lessons are discussion and exercises on how to read maps, accompanied by assignments to make familiar the map of the Mediterranean. Because knowing the configuration and locations of the Mediterranean is foundational to the course, students must be able to navigate it cartographically. However, going beyond the rote learning that may be necessary here, I later “break” the map in order to begin to talk about space and place. For example, the simple exercise of flipping the map of the Mediterranean 90 degrees to the right, with west at the top of the map, can be transformative. Beyond the shock of reorientation, which relocates center and periphery, the exercise also introduces early Muslim maps on which west at the top is common, if not normative. As the course proceeds, cartographic maps interact with, and are increasingly qualified or occasionally replaced by conceptual and imaginary constructions of the Mediterranean.

§ *Interrogating the map.* One of the fundamental logistical problems of the medieval Mediterranean history course is how to incorporate into the curriculum the large land-based empires whose histories skirt or intrude upon the Mediterranean. For example, the roles played in the Mediterranean by the early caliphate, the kingdom of the Franks, or the Saljūq sultanate bring up questions regarding the efficacies,

inadequacies, and costs for land-based state formations with territorial depth to operate in the Mediterranean. In order to help students become aware of this matter I ask them to look at the map and think about a seemingly simple opposing pair of heuristic categories that distinguish between two types of polity—sea-based states (thalassocracies) and land-based states (which can be neologized in opposition to thalassocracy as *geocracies*). I ask students to respond to maps of different historical periods to make comparisons using this distinction. This kind of exercise immediately leads to other categories that make conditional the original heuristic opposition. Accordingly, a second heuristic pair, space and place, adds a level of qualification that requires students to return to the map to distinguish between features of location versus features of area. Is a site historically significant on account of its pinpoint location or because its position is part of an extended range or area? Thirdly, space and place must be modified by scale, which has gained ground in recent years among archaeologists, who require categories of analysis to apply to societies lacking or having only tendentious written sources. Scale as a category of analysis opens up questions of small and large places and small and large spaces in a world of thalassocracies and geocracies.

In the schema that emerges, distinctions among the categories sometimes become fuzzy or melt away, but they open up discussion by arousing curiosity. (The devil is in the details.) Whereas anthropologists have often theorized place as culturally constructed and space as measurable, my definitions allow for both place and space to be culturally constructed. This permits the incorporation into the course of Mediterranean *imaginaires* found in travel narratives, pilgrimage guides, literature, law, personal and business documentation, maps, and other sources, which can re-map the sea and its adjacencies.

I have used these opposing pairs in class for some time, but never considered conceptualizing them in a unified way until now. In fact, the heuristic can be visualized as a three-dimensional Cartesian coordinate system upon which historical phenomena can be plotted:



Needless to say, these categories, sometimes reduced or rendered gross for the classroom, operate interdependently and reflexively. I deploy them to elicit class participation and debate, and as descriptors, rather than as definitive objects of historical knowledge. By working with the opposing pairs throughout the term, students become familiarized with the heuristic and use its elements to tease out answers to more specific traditionally framed historical questions.

Keep in mind that I am not attempting to anthropologically theorize the medieval Mediterranean. I only offer a heuristic approach for presenting and thinking about it in the classroom. Neither am I arguing for geographical determinism, but rather for juxtaposing cartographic space and place with conceptual space and place in the interplay of land and sea. The purpose is to provide students with gateways to historical thinking and problem solving.

2. Roundtable topic: *Is it important that our students understand how medieval studies used to operate before it redefined itself as a Mediterranean field?*

§ *Re-centering: Three genealogies that warrant re-orienting the metanarrative.* Since instructors of medieval Mediterranean history bring a wide range of training and disciplinary background from many different fields, there is no single iteration of “how medieval studies used to operate.” In fact, Mediterranean studies de-centers many traditional academic perspectives. What happens when you come at medieval history from the Mediterranean, as opposed to the Northwest?

Notice that if I were to write “the East” I would be using a common referent—with all its baggage—that you are likely to understand, whereas when I refer to a capitalized “Northwest” you may wonder what exactly I am talking about. If you re-center the Middle Ages to the Mediterranean, medieval Western Europe and its hermeneutic of proto-nationalism—now relocated to a peripheral (northwest) position—are much diminished. There’s no practical reason to refer to it as the Northwest, but the change in perspective reminds us when looking at the map that Europe is a relatively small appendage attached to the much greater landmass (named Eurocentrically Asia). The view from the medieval Mediterranean is much less useful for nationalist ends than the heavy Anglo-centric bearing of medieval studies as taught in American and British universities. In fact, it is positively refreshing when “insular” does not automatically refer to the British Isles.

Another way history used to operate is even more radically reframed by Mediterranean studies. Classics—in a way the original Mediterranean studies—produced an ancient foundation for nineteenth and twentieth-century Eurocentrism (in partnership with art history) by anchoring its perspective on a Greek-Phoenician binary. Replicating a feature of its Greek primary sources, in which Phoenicians were crafty and untrustworthy in opposition to forthright and honorable Greeks, Classics distorted the Iron Age, reproduced a European Orientalism founded on Greek-Ottoman opposition, and fueled anti-Semitism. Western European medieval studies often reproduced the Classics binary as Christian-Muslim, which the Mediterranean view helps to undermine.

Near Eastern studies also offered a way to do medieval history. The old academic orientalism, from which Near Eastern studies is descended, was conceived as a field with many disciplines, but after World War II was partly redefined through area studies. There “Semitic” was not a negative signifier, and accordingly, Near Eastern studies was an antidote to Classics’ dismissal of the East. Out of the old orientalism and Near Eastern studies came Islamic studies and Islamic history, categories that defy the area studies paradigm, and whose habitual contradistinction to the medieval West never constituted a commensurate counterpoise. The very terms Near and Middle East, whose locations and dimensions changed over time, are relational terms that point to Western Europe. Their genealogies pass through the war offices and foreign services of the UK and USA, mirroring national, colonial, and imperial projects against which Mediterranean studies offers resistance.

The extent to which Mediterranean studies resolves some of these structural predispositions becomes part of the definition of Mediterranean studies. Mediterranean studies lacks teleologies associated with identity formation and nationalism, reframes Eurocentrism and Orientalism, and is emphatically not an area studies project.

Students need to know this stuff. Although the paragraphs above are about the nineteenth- and twentieth-century academy, of which we are heirs, its work and structural predispositions shaped a good deal of the subject matter in our courses. As such, teaching about it offers students context for what we are trying to do now. Furthermore, this material helps identify, and get students thinking about sibling academic projects, such as Atlantic studies and Indian Ocean studies, or the “the oceanic turn” more broadly. Most importantly, this material should heighten instructor and student awareness of possible biases in Mediterranean studies. How will Mediterranean studies be found wanting or blameworthy in the future?

3. Roundtable topic: *How should instructors navigate the “presentist” concerns that such a course is likely to inspire in its students, given its increased attention to ethnic/religious relations, colonialism, etc.?*

The same ways we always do, by reminding students that “the past is a foreign country.” I do not think the medieval Mediterranean course is exceptional in this regard.

In my experience the more distant the past, the less it evokes presentist concerns on the part of students. Over decades of teaching courses in medieval Jewish history I have yet to witness a student become emotional or uncomfortable when we read the Hebrew narratives that vividly describe the Crusader massacres of Jews in 1096. However, teaching the Holocaust is another matter entirely.

Sometimes students react to particular histories because those histories have been inscribed as memory in particular religious, ethnic, or national communities. Along those lines, students who react to course content with discomfort, outrage, or protest can be invested in a version of history as memory that is linked to contemporary conflicts, such as Israel-Palestine, Greece-Turkey, etc. Other times, students respond on account of their political and ideological commitments. Needless to say, such responses are likely to differ among institutions and programs.

If the medieval Mediterranean history instructor establishes the ground rules for their course and explains the way professional historians think and approach sources, then when those moments pop up in class the instructor has firm ground to stand upon. In addition, it is very important to alert students to the fact that history is used and misused. Examples from the medieval Mediterranean abound.