

Connecting Art Histories

From Riverbed to Seashore.

Art on the Move in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean in the Early Modern Period.

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A. Description

“The stream that runs through the city of Sarajevo ... flows into the river of Saray”; this river in turn meets waters arriving from Herzegovina and Croatia before it flows over mountainous terrain into the Sava which ‘meets the Danube right beside Belgrade.’ The Danube itself in all its majesty eventually runs into the Black Sea, and ‘it is clearer than sunlight’; the Black Sea meets the Mediterranean in Istanbul and the Mediterranean, in turn, flows through the straits of Gibraltar into the Surrounding Sea which meets the larger Ocean ‘by the order of the Creator of both worlds.’ These are the words of Evliya Çelebi (1611 – after 1683), the Ottoman traveler whose ten hefty volumes may well be the most monumental example of travel writing in any language.”¹ Indeed, for this seventeenth-century author the rivers seem to have been a system of capillaries, forever in movement, flowing gently one into the next, filling out the seas, allowing them to flow further, into each other, connecting the world: the world of the Ottomans, that of the Europeans and further, beyond the known boundaries, the mysterious oceans that hug the globe.

For Claudio Magris, writing some four hundred year later—the Danube leaves behind “a Nilotic slime in which pullulate germs still confused and indistinct”—a lively melting pot of races and cultures, a fertile mud in which flourished a Carpatho-Balkan community that resulted from an ancient but still extant underground stream, that of the Byzantine-Turkish-Mongols seeking the Lands of Rum, and that bathed the shores of the Danubian principates.²

¹ Cemal Kafadar, “An Ottoman Gentleman’s Encounter with Latinity: Evliya Celebi in Dalmatia”, in Alina Payne ed. *Croatia and the Mediterranean. Portable Archaeology and the Poetics of Influence* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

² Magris quotes the Romanian Nicolae Iorga. Claudio Magris, *Danube* (London: Collins Harvill, 1989; ital. 1986), p. 363.

These two testimonies are remarkable for zeroing in on rivers as the cultural infrastructure of the Mediterranean world, as the carriers of people, things, and ideas that fused in myriad ways once they reached the larger pool of the inland sea, of the Mediterranean. In their own ways they reveal an act of attention that is eloquently represented by the exaggerated emphasis on the rivers as blue highways linking various seas into a network on this 15th century map.



Scholarship, however, has generally neglected this secondary system of contact. Not that the Mediterranean has not claimed a central place in recent work—especially among historians, though art historians have also joined the trend—but the original Braudelian idea of a shore and a hinterland and the ties between them has been somewhat moved to the sidelines so appealing has the work on the cultures bordering the sea become.³ Yet,

³ Classic studies of the Mediterranean remain Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed et Charlemagne* (1935); Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949); S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (1967-2000). Recent scholarship, particularly in history, has returned to these themes: Peregrine

the liquid network of rivers—those natural highways—that extends inland and ties the golden fabled shores with the mountains and the peoples living in their shadow or along the paths of the rivers’ passage is as interesting as it is understudied. Among them the king of the rivers has to be the Danube, running a parallel course to the Mediterranean and cutting across Europe from West to East only to come to rest in the Black Sea thus pouring itself into the system of communicating vessels of the Mediterranean—the old Roman *mare nostrum* itself, the Sea of Marmara, the Black Sea, and, the last ripple within this body of water that separates and unites three continents, the Sea of Azov. But the Danube is not alone in so swelling the Mediterranean world with the cultures along its shores. The Sava, the Adige, the Pruth, the Dniester and Dnieper, not to mention the Don (which flows into the Sea of Azov) connect the “traditional” Mediterranean cultures—the Italian, the Ottoman, the Greek/Byzantine, the Spanish—with the world of the Balkans and beyond: to Albania, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary, to Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania; but also, to the North and North/East, to Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. Alongside the caravan routes that crossed the Anatolian plateau and linked Tabriz and Baghdad with Bursa and Izmir on the East/West axis, and, on a North/South axis, Antalya with the Black Sea, the rivers also carried craftsmen and slaves, merchants and armies, silks and spices, furs and wheat, gold and silver and most of all salt, together with books and luxury objects, jewelry and painted panels, tiles and marble in all directions radiating towards the center—the sites of Mediterranean power—and away from it. Florentine silk merchants bought their raw materials from Asterabad (on the Caspian) and the city of Ancona had noteworthy colonies on the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.⁴ It is also no coincidence that the famous Battle of Mohacs (1687) was fought on the shores of

Horden and Nicholas Purcell, The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History (Oxford, 2000); David Abulafia, ed. The Mediterranean in History (London, 2003); W.V. Harris, ed. Rethinking the Mediterranean (Oxford, 2005); Gabriel Piterberg, Teofilo F. Ruiz, and Geoffroy Symcox eds. Braudel Revisited: The Mediterranean World 1600-1800 (Toronto, 2010).

⁴ See in particular the activity of Tommaso Spinelli in Florence. See Philip Jacks, The Spinelli of Florence (University Park, Penn State Press,), p. 83. On Ancona’s colonies along the Black Sea and Sea of Azov (threatened after 1375—the fall of the Armenian empire to the Mamluks) see Eliyahu Ashtor, “Il commercio levantino di Ancona nel basso Medioevo”, in Studies on Levantine Trade in the Middle Ages (London: Variorum Reprints, 1978), pp. 216.

the Danube—along which the Ottomans penetrated into the heart of Europe and dreamed of extending their empire.



Süleymanname, Janissary recruitment in the Balkans.

Starting from this perspective of powerful riverine ties between the sea and the hinterland, this project seeks to develop a framework for investigating the mediating role between

East and West of the Balkans and their northern neighbors, as well as the region's contribution to the larger Mediterranean cultural melting pot in the early modern period. It is the thesis underlying this project that the penetration of Islamic cultures into Europe occurred over a broader terrain than is generally acknowledged and that the eastern frontier extending away from the Mediterranean deep into the interior played a determinant role in negotiating the dialogue between western Europe and Persia, Armenia, Georgia and Ottoman Turkey. On the cusp between cultures and religions—mostly Eastern Orthodox (except for eg. Hungary, Dalmatia and Poland), and mostly of Slavic language (except for eg. Romania)—these principalities, kingdoms and fiefdoms came to embody hybridity, to act as a form of buffer or cultural “switching” system that assimilated, translated and linked the cultures of central Asia with the western European ones. Some became satellites of the Ottoman empire, others retained political independence if not a cultural one, but all testify to the seeping of a complex culture inland from the Mediterranean seas along riverine routes.

A project concentrated on the cultural exchanges between the Mediterranean and the inland perimeter towards the North would also help adjust our Eurocentric glasses that have seen an early modern world—mostly called Renaissance—that was emanating from Italy, and especially from Rome, Venice and Florence and that excluded the contribution of other centers, perceived as peripheral. At most, recent scholarship—some of the best generated from I Tatti and the KHI, Florence—has focused on the cultural ties between eastern European countries and Italy, but leaving no doubts as to the direction of influence and the location of cultural hegemony. Instead, the project I am proposing here is seeking a more balanced view of the complex ties that connected the “hinterland” with the Mediterranean and aims to recover its role in the contaminated world that the sea engendered.

Much of the bias in favor of Western Europe as cultural leader across history had to do with the Industrial Revolution and was a product of it. Britain, France, Germany etc. rose quickly to the fore as industrial nations in the 19th century while the more agrarian focused eastern countries did not, thus sliding from the scene of modernity. While the

western countries may be justifiably seen as the cradle of modernity as we know it, it does not follow that the same patterns obtain with respect to the early modern period. Nor does it obtain that Renaissance culture was exclusively western-driven. Indeed, it is another aim of this project to challenge this perception and draw attention to the contributions to the “center” of European culture of the Islamic world and the “in between” world of frontier European territories. Taking a trans-regional approach this project aims to reconstruct the fluid spaces that characterized a period in which hegemonies were short-lived and unstable, and in which contact nebulas generated artistic nebulas that challenge our most cherished art historical categories like influence, regional identities and originality.

B. Historical and Geographic Boundaries:

The historical period this project focuses on is 1400-1700—naturally allowing some leeway at either end if an applicant proposal makes a valid intellectual case for greater continuity. This is the period traditionally labeled “Renaissance” and “Baroque” –terms that would be anachronistic to use for the geographical areas under discussion here.

The geographic area this project addresses is perhaps less easy to define in our contemporary terms since current nation states have little to do with the more amorphous and variable boundaries that were constantly drawn in this period. However, having said that, it is precisely this state of amorphousness that this project aims to unpack; it is this geographic instability that was the glue binding territories and cultures together and that this project proposes to explore. It is also this territorial hybridity that allowed a more than usual cultural porosity to come into being such that a Mediterranean world could be transmitted and have an active agency as far North as Poland or Ukraine (to use contemporary country names).

It is therefore the aim of the project to look to the European countries that bordered the extensions of the Mediterranean (such as the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, also

the Adriatic) and that were “serviced” by the rivers that flowed into these seas thus indirectly linking them to the Mediterranean. The main focus is on countries such as those on the Balkan peninsula and the territories North of the Balkans that were within reach of these rivers and seas. In today’s terms this territory would include Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Moldavia, Bulgaria, the republics of the former Yugoslavia—that is, those European and Christian countries that experienced most the Eastern/Islamic and the Mediterranean/Southern impact. Parts of eastern Hungary, southeastern Poland, maybe eastern Slovakia could be also part of the project, though their geography places them also within other and different spheres of influence that are much more western European. For this reason the Danube itself, though such a central “avenue” across Europe, would be part of this project only in its final reach towards the Black Sea.