

## Spring Equinox in the Maghrib: Wrecks, People, and Things in the Sea

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In 1762, a ghost ship appeared off the Tunisian coast between Tabarka and Bizerte during the spring equinox, notorious for treacherous weather. According to a local chronicler: “Perceived in the distance was a ship with masts but no flag flying that approached the shore, then drew away. It was the month of April [1762] and unusually cold . . . the next morning, we saw the vessel veer toward land while a violent tempest raged.”<sup>1</sup> Wrecked on the rocky shoreline, it funneled unimaginable wealth to pastoralists, villagers, and scavengers from far and wide. The ship proved to be without passengers or crew whose fate remains unknown until this day.

My essay opens with this story fragment to urge historians to tease out unimagined ports-of-entry and social portals for viewing land and sea relationships, whether their work focuses upon the Mediterranean or larger bodies of water. A prime concern in this contribution is how “objects”—naval stores, weapons, machinery, textiles, and novel comestibles—traveled, were recycled, or were resold.<sup>2</sup> The essay’s premise is that small unexplored spaces on the Mediterranean Sea’s North African rim bid us to contemplate how the Mediterranean was navigated and experienced elsewhere. The proposed methodology interlaces historical ethnography, different kinds of biography, and environmental history. Things slide momentarily out of focus, while others unexpectedly surface, as was argued in my book *Mediterraneans*.<sup>3</sup>

Before the second-wave surge of research on Ottoman maritime history, the Sea’s northern shores had long been privileged by historians. In the present rush to the water, the Basin’s eastern end still attracts more notice than points west of Alexandria.<sup>4</sup> Until recently, the Maghrib was peopled mainly by shady Moors, renegades, captives, and pirates, and after 1830, by “the colonized,” although the historiography is shifting. Nevertheless, a handful of port cities cum capitals—Algiers and Tunis—occupy center stage, while smaller ports—Tetouan, Annaba, and Tabarka—languish in obscurity. We know something about North African vessels docking in Marseille or Livorno, or seized on the high seas, but little of ships foundering or smashed to bits at anchor during storms. Literature on shipwrecks during Antiquity and on seafaring for the British Isles, navy, and empire is substantial.<sup>5</sup> As metaphor and genre, ships in distress have inspired an enormous corpus of literary and artistic works. Yet virtually nothing exists for the North African shores of the Sea, even in the modern era.<sup>6</sup>

A major problem is that the Mediterranean is approached with a cadastral *mentalité*. Scholars are loath to linger on beaches or wharves; nor do they climb into lighters or board ships. Sailing specialists—navigators, divers, and seamen—are hardly recognized, if at all. The identities of brokers are vague; the “land and sea” interface—social vistas from the water’s edge—remains uncharted. Coast-hugging “provinces” tend to be severed from a vague “interior,” home to land-lubber peasants and pastoralists. Mediation is cast as a human activity monopolized by “minorities.” I would argue that “natural” or

geographical entities such as islets, whether inhabited or not, functioned as mediators. Complex, highly variable climatic conditions dictated who sailed where, when, and how; as such, they constituted social actors of a sort as well.<sup>7</sup> And an unexamined assumption begs for reflection: the notion that “to be connected” was deemed desirable or positive for contemporaries. In brief, cultural and/or political evidence, factors, and explanations do not suffice.

Let’s revisit the saga of a ghost ship adrift with neither crew nor passengers. Eventually winds hurled the ship onto shore where pastoralists from the Mogod tribe grazed flocks in springtime. As the vessel shattered, people scurried to the bluffs to watch. For the locals, the tragedy proved a wondrous blessing. After the huge swells subsided, “all the commodities of India and Christian countries washed ashore . . . the riches of the East and West.” Foragers hastened from everywhere. Men and women combed the beaches where they collected “grey amber, musk, and precious stones, and European textiles . . . the price for textiles dropped . . . because markets, homes, and even the tents of the pastoralists were filled with them.”<sup>8</sup> Rural peoples seemed unaware of the value of the Indian white cotton, velour, and satin thrown up on the sand. But folks in the capital knew better. Putting aside disdain for provincial bumpkins, the bourgeoisie of Tunis invaded the Mogods’ territory as did eager shoppers from across Ifriqiya. “And the poor became rich.”<sup>9</sup>

Some goods drifting through global marketplaces as flotsam and jetsam deposited by tides were entirely new. Washed ashore was coffee, already widely consumed in North Africa. Yet containers of white iron sheltered unknown products: “small round leaves resembling the leaves of capers.” Traders in Bizerte identified the mystery plant as tea. This snippet of information suggests that denizens of Tunisian ports consumed tea, perhaps as an elite beverage that was unfamiliar to peasant households.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, pastoralists harvested the vessel’s masts for firewood, picking them clean until nothing remained. For years after, the currents disgorged more treasures. This spit of coastline must have attracted water gleaners from all over for a long time. The national identity of the ship was never ascertained, generating lengthy local and international diplomatic and legal wrangling. Thus emerges one complex channel for the circulation of things from near and far away—as they were lost, found, sold, and purchased—a Mediterranean and oceanic economy of debris and scavenging.

Small slivers of data from the water’s edge have in fact offered a panoramic view to historians of the Mediterranean. First, there is the matter of who knows how to swim. The Mogods’ shaykh dispatched divers to the wreck to reconnoiter. Bizerte boasted skilled divers because for centuries it served as a hub for the lucrative coral industry; yet that “pastoralists” braved the waves seems intriguing. Moreover, the tribesmen operated a well-oiled system for profiting from calamity. Guards were posted on the bluffs and, after the doomed vessel broke open, trains of pack animals carried away some spoils. Did the Mogods know that the spring equinox was a fortuitous season to reap “all of the riches of India and the West”?

Ships and their contents were seized, bartered, resold, repurposed, and ransomed in the same way that people were. Their hulls and masts were prized in wood-hungry North Africa. Many cherished objects circulated widely in gray or black markets as “contraband,” violating state regulations and/or international treaty obligations. Wrecks offered an abundance of rare and precious goods, mundane objects such as iron ore, and

things never before seen.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, shipwrecks forged connections on multiple registers and scales. Cargoes circulated in the wake of disaster and ownership was contested in a mare's nest of legal arenas posing the jurisdictional issues of Islamic law versus the bilateral treaties concluded between the Husaynid Dynasty and European powers. Did 18th-century Tunisian rulers and courtiers, who adjudicated many maritime contests, apply Maliki and/or Hanafi prescriptions for losses, jettison, collision, salvage, and title? Did Islamic legal norms inform actual on-the-ground practices and how did long-established bilateral commercial treaties with European powers come into play?<sup>12</sup>

My essay sought to engage in travel and coresidence simultaneously. *Anthropologie partagée* was combined with *histoire croisée* to flush out approaches for “land and sea,” setting conventional narratives adrift, if only momentarily. This beckons us to critically re-evaluate the historical carrying capacity of narratives that claim to be “Mediterranean” but fail to reach the water's edge. Ships and wrecks as historical “containers” raise additional questions: what mechanisms or forces channeled things as well as people to intended destinations—or to accidental ports of call? Who were the on-the-ground brokers between North Africa and the wider maritime world and what capillary strands of association and trust (or mistrust) did they draw upon or violate? How did the Mediterranean as both geocultural frame and nautical actor—with its seasons, winds, currents, and countless islands big and small, inhabited and uninhabited—dictate who went where, when, and how? And how does a shoreline perspective where swimmers and Bedouins scrambled, either to save themselves from raging seas or partake of bounty floating in the waters, contribute to “reimagining the Mediterranean”? Remapping the Mediterranean as contact zones of varying scales and tempos, rather than as a single unified sea, paradoxically resutures it with broader historical processes or patterns. Historians need to decamp from the Mediterranean's well-studied shores to peer into different centers as well as margins.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad al-Saghir ibn Yusuf, *Mechra El Melki: Chronique Tunisienne du règne des fils d'Ali Turki (1705–1771)*, trans. Mohammed Lasram and Victor Serres, 2nd ed. (Tunis: Editions Bouslama, 1978 [1900]), 439. The original manuscript in Arabic, titled *Tarikh al-Mashra' al-Milki fi Saltanat Awlad 'Ali Turki*, is unpublished and undated.

<sup>2</sup>See Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Paula Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and esp. Alan Mikhail, “Anatolian Timber and Egyptian Grain: Things that Made the Ottoman Empire,” in *Early Modern Things*, 274–93.

<sup>3</sup>Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800–1900* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2011). A fuller discussion is Julia Clancy-Smith, “Gone Missing: The Mediterranean of the Barbary Coasts,” in *Re-imagining the Mediterranean*, ed. Judith Tucker (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup>Studies on medieval and early modern Iberia, North Africa, and the Western Mediterranean have profoundly altered the narrative. Julia Clancy-Smith, “The Middle East and North,” in *The New World History: A Teacher's Companion*, 2nd ed., ed. Ross E. Dunn (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Fernand Braudel emphasized the perils of winter storms for both the Mediterranean and Black Seas. On English seafaring, see Robert Lee, “The Seafarers' Urban World: A Critical Review,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 25 (2013): 23–64.

<sup>6</sup>Cheryl Ward, “The Sadana Island Shipwreck: An Eighteenth-Century AD Merchantman off the Red Sea Coast of Egypt,” *World Archaeology* 32 (2001): 368–82.

<sup>7</sup>Historians in “water studies” might consult scholarship in outlying fields. For example, Christian Weitmeyer and Hardi Döhler, “Traces of Roman Offshore Navigation in Skerki Bank (Strait of Sicily),” *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 38 (2009): 254–80; and Giuseppe M. R. Manzella, “The Seasonal Variability of the Water Masses and Transport through the Strait of Sicily,” in *Seasonal and Interannual Variability of the Western Mediterranean Sea*, ed. Paul E. La Viollette (Washington, D.C.: American Geophysical Union Publications, 1994), 33–45.

<sup>8</sup>Muhammad al-Saghir, *Tarikh*, 438–41.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 441–42.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 441. See Helen Saberi, *Tea: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010). After the Crimean War, British tea merchants sought new markets in the western Mediterranean, introducing tea to Morocco in the 19th century. On sea foraging, see Eric Jay Dolin, *Brilliant Beacons: A History of the American Lighthouse* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016).

<sup>11</sup>Julia Clancy-Smith, “A View from the Water’s Edge: Greater Tunisia, France, and the Mediterranean before Colonialism, c. 1700–1840s,” in *France and the Mediterranean in the Early Modern World*, ed. Gillian Weiss and Megan Armstrong, special issue, *French History* 29 (2015): 24–30.

<sup>12</sup>Hassan S. Khalilieh, *Islamic Maritime Law: An Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).