

THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Introduction. This paper will define three broad characteristics of the Mediterranean Region. The Mediterranean world can be delineated historically as roughly the extent of the ancient Roman Empire during the reigns of Augustus to Trajan and Hadrian.¹ The Roman provinces entirely surround the “Great Sea” and approximate the three continental areas known today as Southern Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. While a good starting point, the historically demarcated empire of Rome does not exactly parallel what I will characterize as today’s Mediterranean Region. I would probably exclude northern parts of modern day Spain, northern France, certainly southern England, the northern part of the Balkans, the mountains of Armenia, and the Tigris/Euphrates river valley. This would limit the Mediterranean Region to what could be called “the ‘true’ Mediterranean from the olive tree to the great palm groves.”² Key historical features, however, might very well parallel important modern characteristics of the Mediterranean Region.

The “blend of features that connect the parts”³ for the Mediterranean Region are access to the sea and thereby to three continents, barriers to the continental heartlands, and climate. These

¹M. Cary and H. H. Scullard, *A History of Rome down to the Reign of Constantine*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 436-437.

²Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. S. Reynolds (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 232.

³Christopher L. Salter, Joseph J. Hobbs, Jesse H. Wheeler, Jr., and J. Trenton Kostbade, *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 15.

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unifying physical traits determine important cultural aspects that accord this region its special role in world events as well as its noted ambience and charm.

Access to the sea and thereby to three continents. The proximity of the sea greatly affects population density on the coasts (as compared with population density inland), trade and travel on the shipping lanes, and the growth and stability of maritime industries (i.e., the fishing industry).⁴ The combined coastal lengths define the Mediterranean Region as a “great gulf of the Atlantic”—8,000 miles from the Strait of Gibraltar to the mouth of the Don River (Europe), 3,700 miles from the Don River to the Isthmus of Suez (Asia), and 3,100 miles from the Nile River back to Gibraltar (Africa).⁵ The abundance of ports along this expanse of coastline, not to mention the thousands of islands, establish the Mediterranean Region as a major concourse for human interaction. This holds true, at least, for ancient, medieval, and much of the modern periods. The emphasis, however, is different for post-industrial peoples. Jet aircraft and global communication technologies have altered radically and rapidly the scope of the Mediterranean Region’s role as a conduit for civilization exchange. Still the preponderance of coastal towns and cities, shipping ports that ferry goods and people, and geographical terrain that is richly diverse and suitable for harbor make the Mediterranean Region an impressive region for

⁴Monica Beckinsale and Robert Beckinsale, *Southern Europe: A Systematic Geographical Study* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1975), 19ff.

⁵Ellen Churchill Semple, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region: Its Relation to Ancient History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931), 4-7.

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significant cultural exchange.⁶ This use of the Mediterranean Region as a decisive arena for cultural interaction can be illustrated by regarding the Mediterranean Region as a modern-day “battleground” for military maneuvers and encounters, a “battleground” for the never ending clash between major religious cultures (i.e., Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), and as a “haven” or “refuge” for terrorists and terrorist activity (like the sea pirates of former days).

The twentieth century witnessed major world power presence in the Mediterranean Region as a strategic arena for global stability through a “balance of power” doctrine.⁷ After the Ottoman Empire collapse and subsequent vigorous European colonization, the corollary jockeying for religious domination in the Mediterranean Region, i.e., Christian versus Islamic, intensified dramatically with the rise of Zionism, the Nazis and the Holocaust, and the formation of Israel as a national state for the Jews. The regular use of cosmopolitan urban melting-pots in the Mediterranean Region like Cairo, Jerusalem, Rome, and Tripoli for anarchic activity of “outcasts” created by such a ferment of cultural clash gives little surprise. Yet all of this functions precisely to advance the cross-flow of radically diverse cultures in the Mediterranean Region not just for regional benefit but for the global conscious.

From history, climate, the cultivation of the olive and other aspects of a common civilization, the Mediterranean region has a certain unity. One can see it on the map. Yet it is too much a part of Europe, too much a part of the larger strategic concerns of non-Mediterranean powers, too diverse in the nations which

⁶John Cole, *Geography of the World's Major Regions* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 308.

⁷Horacio Rivero, “Why A U.S. Fleet in the Mediterranean?” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 103, no. 5 (May 1977), 70.

encircle its waters, to constitute a subject of specifically regional politics, economics or security.⁸

The parallel of these modern day adaptations with the historic consequence of the Mediterranean Region as a cultural nexus is striking, especially after decades of declining economic, industrial, and technological importance for the region.

Barriers from the continental heartlands. The two basic barriers of *deserts* and *high mountains* restrict access to and from the continental heartlands and define the Mediterranean Region as a geographically and perhaps culturally contained region. While this analysis has its limitations, a certain interconnectedness between the coastal areas certainly exists. The key is the sea as a conduit for vessels transporting goods and peoples from port to port, and the barriers play an important role in this determination.

The greater Mediterranean “touches the great chain of deserts” on three sides—the Sahara to the south, the Syrian to the east, and the Russian steppes to the north.⁹ The great Sahara desert “dominates the sea,” and the Mediterranean “acts as a frontier between these deserted lands and southern Europe.”¹⁰ But this frontier is landlocked: “it is, above all, a sea ringed round by mountains”; “all round the sea the mountains are present, except one stretch from southern Tunisia to southern Syria”; “these are high, wide, never-ending mountains—the Alps, the

⁸John C. Campbell, “The Mediterranean Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs* 53, no. 4 (July 1975), 605.

⁹Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, 170-171.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 169.

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Pyrenees, the Apennines, the Dinaric Alps, the Caucasus, the Anatolian mountains, the mountains of Lebanon, the Atlas, and the Spanish Cordillera.”¹¹ As a result, “the Mediterranean means more than landscapes of vines and olive trees and urbanized villages; these are merely the fringe. Close by, looming above them, are the dense highlands, the mountain world.”¹² And because of such rugged terrain, “plains tend to be small, to face the sea, and to be separated from each other by mountainous territory.”¹³ So this ring of mountain ranges with the corresponding circle of vast desert lands prescribe the Mediterranean Region proper, the ‘true’ Mediterranean, as “fringes” of the great sea. The sea itself is central and dominant. The sea is “the invisible landscape.”¹⁴ This perspective serves to shift the focus of the “fringe” areas (e.g., the coastal areas) from kinship with the continental heartlands to affinity with other Mediterranean maritime ports.

Modern as well as historic examples of this might seem a little bit strained. The classic illustration of this “separateness” from the heartland is ancient Greece and its warring city-states.

¹¹Ibid., 25-26.

¹²Ibid., 26-27.

¹³Salter, et al., *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 2nd ed., 133.

¹⁴J. M. Houston, *The Western Mediterranean World: An Introduction to its Regional Landscapes* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 37ff.

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Another plausible instance might be the old trunk routes on the sea.¹⁵ Two possible modern examples require a bit of explanation.

First, because of the Mediterranean Region as nexus, countries around the Mediterranean Region cannot isolate themselves and avoid interaction with other countries of the Mediterranean Region. The nations of the region are coastal lands bridged to one another by the common sea. Even if they wished otherwise, this nexus brings about *forced cultural and political interaction*. In other words, Libya cannot ignore Greece completely, Lebanon cannot avoid contact with Spain, and Israel must deal with Morocco at some level.¹⁶ Avoidance of *interplay* is not possible. But rare exceptions such as Albania's isolation do exist, so perhaps there are a few historical and political oddities. The consistent reality, though, is that of forced interaction.

A second illustration might be the *relatively different outlook* of coastal inhabitants from the people who live inland, i.e., the mountain dwellers and the desert nomads.¹⁷ Coastal inhabitants seem to be more cosmopolitan with flexible adaptability, but mountain dwellers and desert nomads remain more isolated, colloquial, and clannish. This, however, is a general assumption that needs substantial verification with more complete and current data.

¹⁵See John N. Pryor, *Geography, Technology, and War: Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean, 649-1571* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14.

¹⁶See Baruch Boxer, *Israeli Shipping and Foreign Trade*, The University of Chicago Department of Geography, Research Paper No. 48 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 98, 103.

¹⁷Jake Page, *Planet Earth: Arid Lands* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1984), 138.

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Climate. Climate is possibly the most consistent trait of the Mediterranean Region. “Both because of the presence of the Sea, and of the associated complex form of the lands, this type has here an extension in space to which there is no parallel elsewhere.”¹⁸ Variations are exceptional. In fact, the Mediterranean Region is well noted for the “type” of climate that bears its name.¹⁹ Its main features are three-fold: (1) “rain falls freely in the winter half year”; (2) “summer is a period of drought which may be partial, or complete”; and (3) “the annual range of temperature is small, so that typically the winters are mild for the latitude and the summers not hot.”²⁰ The distinctive *macchia* vegetation, *chaparral* in North America, is “composed of hard-leaved evergreen shrubs and trees known as sclerophyll forest.”²¹ The fauna of the Mediterranean biome, though, “is not particularly distinctive.”²² Because of climate, a rural, agricultural way of life permeates the Mediterranean Region,²³ and tourism thrives on this distinctively mild and pleasant environment.

¹⁸Marion I. Newbiggin, *The Mediterranean Lands: An Introductory Study in Human and Historical Geography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1924), 46.

¹⁹See Salter, et al., *Essential of World Regional Geography*, 2nd ed., 67.

²⁰Ibid., 34; cf. Houston, *The Western Mediterranean World*, 710-711; David Briggs and Peter Smithson, *Fundamentals of Physical Geography* (Totawa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1985), 121-124.

²¹Alan C. G. Best and Harm J. de Blij, *African Survey* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), 45.

²²Edward F. Bergman and Tom L. McKnight, *Introduction to Geography* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 79.

²³Best and de Blij, *African Survey*, 570.

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A lack of heavy industrialization in the Mediterranean Region generally highlights the region as an agrarian based economy with sizeable pockets of poverty, lack of education, and limited resources. Exceptions to this generalization do exist, notably Rome, Athens, Tel-Aviv, and perhaps Cairo. Progress toward modernization spurred by energy shifts, market expansion, and capital infusion is noticeable in areas like Spain's Costa del Sol and the Italian Riviera in addition to the pre-World War II industrial complexes of the Po River Valley and the Costa Brava region around Barcelona.²⁴

Fruit trees of various sorts are found in abundance, and olives and grapes are everywhere. "Olive trees and grapevines have extensive root systems that allow them to survive the summer droughts."²⁵ The geographical range for vineyards is much greater than that for olive orchards. The range of olives pretty much coincides with the Mediterranean Region proper, the 'true' Mediterranean. There is no doubt that *the* crop of the Mediterranean Region is the olive. "Virtually all of the world's supply [of olives] is produced in countries that touch or lie near the Mediterranean sea, or in a Mediterranean climate zone."²⁶ Not a meal passes—breakfast, lunch, dinner—without the olive or the use of olive oil in food production.

Finally, growth in the tourist industry for the Mediterranean Region continues to help spur economic expansion for the entire region. This is true for the typical tourist destinations

²⁴Salter, et al., *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 2nd ed., 136-137.

²⁵Ibid., 133.

²⁶Ibid.

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such as the Riviera resorts, Rome, Istanbul, Athens, Jerusalem, and Cairo as well as other, unexpected destinations. Europeans from the north favor the warm Mediterranean shores as a winter retreat. Classical architecture and archaeology attract tourists from all parts of the globe. Religious attachments draw pilgrims from all faiths to the Mediterranean Region but particularly travelers from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

These are the things that define the Mediterranean Region: climate and the agricultural life of the region's inhabitants along with a distinct flora and the olive, the mountains as barriers that intensify the coastal area cohesiveness, and proximity to the sea itself as determinative of the Mediterranean Region as a global passageway—destined to leave its indelible mark on this world for all time.

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