Abstract: This is a contribution to be published in a volume entitled *Mediterranean Studies*, edited by Roberto Dainotto and Eric Zakim for the Modern Language Association (MLA), as part of a new MLA series on Transnational Literatures. The editors had asked their contributors to respond to their introduction in which they encourage new ways of conceptualizing cultural contact, and to suggest new approaches to reading and writing the Mediterranean, creating a new epistemology of place, especially with a view to literature. Contributions span all geographic areas of the Mediterranean. While I was initially asked to look at modern travelers with a view to Greek antiquity and ancient travelers, the paper gradually turned into an essay on how to integrate some recent work on the ancient Mediterranean within the editors’ agenda.
Watching the Great Sea of Beauty:
Thinking the Ancient Greek Mediterranean

Constanze Güthenke

Watching the Great Sea of Beauty
(epi to polu pelagos tetrammenos tou kalou kai theorôn)

Plato, Symposion 210d4

“So, what is it like? ... What is the sea like?”
Elisewin smiles.
“Very beautiful.”
“And?”
Elisewin keeps smiling.
“At a certain point it stops.”

A. Baricco, Oceano Mare

The Island Sea

The characters who in Alessandro Baricco’s poetic novel Oceano Mare (1993) have traveled to the in-between world of a little pensione on the edge of an unnamed, timeless seashore, are each challenged to encounter, come to know and somehow contain the ocean sea they find themselves facing. Those hold the promise of a future, who, like Elisewin, come to recognize, or at least accept, the life-saving limitation of the sea – if only in order to move on to different and new uncertainties. One of the other guests pacing the seashore is a scholar (a relative, it would appear, both of Barthes’ writer on holiday and of Calvino’s author in search of the single wave), whose life project is an Encyclopedia of Boundaries Visible in Nature, with a Separate Appendix on the Boundaries of Human Faculties. For the system of nature to be perfect, he has concluded, it cannot be infinite, and so he finds himself tracing the end of the sea, having sought and
established the precise distance and end point of other natural phenomena already, such as rivers and sunsets. Baricco’s unnamed ocean sea is not equated with the Mediterranean; in fact, the ramifications of the sea-borne stories stretch across the seven seas. But the prospect of limitation and the promise, or threat, of relative stability have been among the most lasting attractions of the Mediterranean as a medium of reflection.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “Mediterranean” primarily as an adjective, with the sense of “almost landlocked, surrounded by dry land”. Grammatically, then, “Mediterranean” denotes a quality, rather than an object, an indicator of place, rather than the place itself. Plato’s famous sound-bite of a simile that sees the Mediterranean’s inhabitants gathered like frogs around a pond, visualizes the contained character of the world as it is known to his Greek protagonists. It also spells out the limitations of experiencing a limited place, above which a wider view, eventually, ought to rise to take in the whole beyond that pond: “I believe that the earth is very large and that we who dwell between the pillars of Hercules and the river Phasis live in a small part of it about the sea, like ants or frogs about a pond, and that many other people live in many other such regions” (*Phaedo* 109a-b).

Delimitation, at the same time, makes for utopian potential, and not only for Plato. In the late 1920s, the German engineer Hermann Sörgel, motivated by the pan-European pacifist movement of the inter-war period, developed detailed plans for the construction of a dam spanning the Straits of Gibraltar, which would in one fell swoop guarantee European independent energy supply by regulating water flow between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, besides largely drying out the Mediterranean basin to create the single big land-mass of “Atlantropa”, reducing its waters indeed to little more than a pond and linking Europe and continental Africa by a land-bridge at Sicily. Inward limitation would give way to a process of converting a global West-East imbalance into a harmonious coexistence of the ‘three A’s’: America, Atlantropa and Asia, all newly rebalanced on parallel North-South axes (Voigt 1998).
For the utopian potential of the Mediterranean, therefore, its expanse needs to be reduced or limited, to allow a specific topos, even if it is an ou-topos, or non-place, to emerge. More often than not, utopian places are island places, defined and surrounded by another medium, whether a sea, a river or a landmass. Clear boundaries, moreover, are exactly what render islands so “good to think with”. Because of such boundaries, the discursive doubling of inside and outside, as Gillian Beer puts her finger on it, “emphasizes both inhabiting and observing. The observer comes in upon a complete world secured within natural boundaries; the island can be observed fully only by inhabiting it” (Beer 1989:22). What is more, “the eye of the observer can in honesty dwell only on the particular. That is another methodological reason for the constant reaffirmation of the island-idea across many intellectual fields. The intense focus of the observer’s eye can be lodged so firmly on this miniaturized zone that she or he can claim simultaneously empathy and control.” (Beer 1989:23). Like the specific, single wave, which Calvino’s writer tries to identify on the seashore, like the particular topics covered by the contributors to this volume, the Mediterranean sea likewise appears to be visible and analyzable only through a shifting sequence of its particulars. The recent and extensive *Literature of Travel and Exploration. An Encyclopedia* (Speake 2003), for example, has plenty of material on various Mediterranean destinations, but no separate entry for ‘The Mediterranean’ as such. But why read and write the Mediterranean in the first place? Despite or because of its bounded fluidity, the expanse of the Mediterranean sea itself, to be comprehensible, takes on aspects of the island character. With it comes the possibility to gain a vantage point that is not merely that of an outside observer, but that is likely to be revealing about the observer, as inhabiting the field of study, as well; and that, by all accounts, has proven a lasting attraction.

It is the combination of the geographically realistic and specific with ideal dimension that makes for the excitement of utopias, and it has done so no less in the case of utopias with an explicitly Mediterranean setting. Among the spate of eighteenth century utopian narratives mapped onto the world of the South (including also the new discoveries of the South Seas), Wilhelm Heinse’s novel *Ardinghello and the Islands of the Blest* (1787) is a particularly stark example: here the ideal world of social experiment first overlaps with
the geographically extremely accurate, only to be overtaken, subsequently, by the uneasy encroachment of real political events. *Ardinghello*, which is mainly set in sixteenth century Italy, leads only very late in the book to the foundation of an artistic community of aesthetically like-minded, libertarian souls on the Cycladic islands of Naxos and Paros (at the time indeed part of the Venetian-ruled Duchy of the Archipelago), which are described following detailed contemporary travel accounts. The episode, however, ends with the remarkably abrupt invasion of the realistic into this still brittle commune: the utopian plan of further expanding the territory of these blessed islands is cut short by the arrival of the Ottomans and their historical take-over of the island territory – and that is the end of the novel. What distinguishes *Ardinghello*, therefore, is the thickness of the ropes that tie the utopian community down to a realistic and geographically and historically verifiable setting. It is not an ou-topos, or an exotically far-flung location; instead, its meaning derives precisely from the promising actuality of its environment. No matter how many or how few people, relatively speaking, traveled to that part of the world (Heinse almost certainly did not), the Mediterranean was reassuringly *there*.

When it comes to the Mediterranean, the search for meaning above and beyond its meticulously charted landscape, ecology and geography, is particularly well developed. It is also not wrong to say that it has been particularly so since the transition to the modern period and a modern subjectivity, especially from the eighteenth century – what Horden and Purcell, in a very shortened short-hand, call by the blanket term of the ‘Romantic Mediterranean’ (Horden and Purcell 2000:28-9). By extension, it is this approach to material geography with the tools of the figurative and metaphorical which causes the ‘poetic’ in Mediterranean studies, as Matvejevic has tried to define it – still feeding on that very logic where the features of the Mediterranean environment in particular are considered as repositories of a wider symbolic meaning. Utopian attraction, subsequently, remains never far from investigations of “thinking the Mediterranean” – as a quasi-island.

Beer’s observation that “these twinned, often irreconcilable, ideals [of empathy and control] within the writing of the human sciences and of literature, can find a point of concentration in the single concept: island” (Beer 1989:23) is part of her effort to assess
the place which island discourse holds between scientific and literary writing; if we recall Matvejevic’s distinction between the extremes of a “historicizing and totalizing”, scientific discourse and a “poetic, and surreptitiously ideological” one of the Mediterranean (Matvejevic 1991:46, as quoted by Dainotto and Zakim), the twin ideals of empathy and control afforded by the island position are replayed in the challenge of Mediterranean writing: being ‘on the inside’, inhabiting, is of course not coeval with a poeticizing discourse, although a nostalgia of inhabiting seems to attach to it, whereas the association of totalizing study with an outside perspective appears to be strong.

Horden and Purcell, in their magisterial history of Mediterranean connectivity in the ancient and early Modern period, unsettle the distinction between an “external” and an “internal” component, too. They are keen to stress the range of variety and divergence on the small-scale level, and therefore proceed through what amounts to an archipelago of micro-ecologies, favoring those over larger claims about Mediterranean political, social, economic, or religious history per se. At the same time, the oscillation between particular and general, between inside and outside, between part and whole has been a recurring concern in theorizing the Mediterranean, and the relation of the Mediterranean to the order outside it, altogether. Horden and Purcell, reflecting on their project, capture this movement above and beyond the movements occurring in the Mediterranean in the image of the kaleidoscope and the metaphor of the chess game, which they gladly adopt from one of their reviewers (Fentress and Fentress 2001:210): “There is a world outside the chess-board. A kaleidoscope is a small contraption one peers into. One can lift one’s eye from the board or the contraption. In neither case is the particular object likely to be mistaken for the whole of reality” (Horden and Purcell 2005:360).

While this may be a wholesome caveat about the horizon of Mediterranean Studies, looking in from the outside, there is also, and has always been, observation within the Mediterranean. There are those who detach, and move, in order to watch. The overlapping, simultaneous trajectories of inhabiting and observing are parameters already of the ancient Mediterranean, even if their logic rests on assuming a firm perspective in the first place. In what follows, I want to focus on the perspective of Greece.
What makes the Mediterranean space as a quasi-island different from the more contained notion of the island proper is the sense of movement across space, and the inversions and crossings of boundaries that come with it, as a prerequisite, a motor, to observation and inhabiting. The Mediterranean, in a geographical sense certainly, is particularly communication-friendly, and it is not by accident that Horden and Purcell have made connectivity the operative mode of their analysis. A striking visual example is their map of the Mediterranean sea showing areas out of sight of land (Horden and Purcell 2000:127): although that area is considerable, it is roughly the same size as the area within sight of land, largely due to the presence and sheer number of islands which are undoubtedly part of what characterizes the Mediterranean as a whole. The result is a map of more or less potential contact-zones.

Since the editors’ concern is ways in which to conceptualize cultural contact, I will look at a range of ancient Greek approaches to thinking about contact, boundaries and passage across the sea in the self-positioning of culture. The anthropologist James Clifford has proposed to look at cultures in terms of travel relations, not by thinking of their travelers as marginal, but by adopting any culture’s farthest range of travel as a significant indicator of its identitarian location (Clifford 1997:25). In this case, the movement and displacement of “ex-centric natives” become parameters of analysis that are constitutive of cultural meaning (25). While Clifford’s is a proposition that deliberately seeks to unsettle the frame of locally centered ethnographic fieldwork, the situation in ancient and classical studies may have been opening some of those doors already. A “Mediterranean” approach, i.e. a search for parameters of comparison within the Mediterranean area, has met with comparatively little resistance in the fields of Ancient History and Archaeology, as the issue of inner-Mediterranean contact has always been part of their fabric – at least latently (Horden and Purcell 2005:349). In other words, these are disciplines that take the Mediterranean as a unit of study, however fiercely debated and however much the Helleno-centricity or Romano-centricity of “our sea” has dominated the discussion, ancient and modern. By the same token, studies of the ancient Mediterranean have largely been historical and archaeological in nature, even though scholars, such as
Horden and Purcell and their critics, are visibly concerned with the accuracy and viability of metaphors used by them and by others. For that same reason I suggest to look at some of the language, literal and figurative, that is used not for but in the ancient Greek Mediterranean to conceive of the sea – the language, in other words, that is the instrument of thinking the ancient Mediterranean. In this sense, I propose the beginnings of a literary micro-ecology.

The Matter and Shape of the Sea

Is there such a thing as an ancient Greek conception of the Mediterranean sea and does it, therefore, make sense to discuss Greece within the framework of Mediterranean studies? It is plausible that the Mediterranean as such, i.e. as a region and a distinctive collectivity of lands, is predominantly an idealizing, romanticizing invention of nineteenth century travelers and scholars, with no or little ancient precedent at all (Shavit 1988; Horden 2005:26). And yet, it seems to be Plato’s frogs around a pond that is matter-of-factly called upon as evidence every time the Mediterranean as a unified area of study needs to be argued for. Plato’s frogs, however, are part of a dialogue about the immortality of the soul and hence about the limited frog-like, mud-dwelling nature of man in relation to the world of ideas, rather than about the frogs (and ants, not to forget) around this sea being in any way different from the “many other peoples living in many other such regions”. Plato’s Mediterranean, in other words, may be much less to do with cultural unity than with universal shortcomings of human culture.

The disputed question of unity, cultural, geographical or environmental, has served as a parameter for Mediterranean studies of one kind or another for a long time, and even though “the idea that the Mediterranean is more interesting as a local category than as an analytic tool is hardly novel anymore”, some marvel at “the curious circumstance that, in an age in which just about every other category has been deconstructed or reconstructed, or at least has self-destructed, ‘the’ Mediterranean has shown a remarkable tenacity in the
face of a barrage of critiques – indeed that barrage has at times seemed simply to confirm its general importance” (Herzfeld 2005:46). Herzfeld, who is articulately and convincingly reserved about ‘Mediterraneanism’ as a self-evident concept, is nonetheless adamant that the concept exists and has an analyzable effect as long as it is formulated and functional in performative acts of self-description, i.e. as long as people call themselves or their cultures ‘Mediterranean’ – whether we agree with the truth-value of that ascription or not. Portugali (2004), likewise, makes “cognitive mapping” the validating factor for any given ‘reality’ of the Mediterranean – cognitive mapping here understood as the creation of an image of the sea as a meaningful reference point for the embodied mind. In other words, to have a notion of the Mediterranean sea plays a role in self-positioning, even if it is very unlikely that in antiquity we are dealing with a concept of Mediterranean unity as such, or at least as scholars and inhabitants believe themselves to be familiar with it today.

The sea is without doubt an important part of the ancient geographical imagination already, but primarily so as a marker and a boundary (Romm 1992; Purves 2006); the play with boundaries between land and sea in particular has certainly been crucial to ancient conceptions of the Mediterranean and to thinking and writing the Mediterranean. The alternation of boundaries, in fact, stretches beyond the sea itself, resulting in a series of concentric circles of land and sea. The Mediterranean sea, filled with islands, is itself surrounded and bordered by land. This land, in turn, is like a large island surrounded by ocean. This renders the landmass of the know world Mediterranean in another sense, to follow a secondary definition of the Oxford English Dictionary: in contrast with *maritime*, “Mediterranean”, when used of land, indicates remoteness from the coast, or a midland location. It is, however, the coastal area, which opens the space of the ancient geographical imagination in a particularly significant way (Romm 1992). As a boundary zone between the Mediterranean sea and the land, lying in an intermediate position, the coast marks the island-sea as inhabited on its very edge, encouraging in this very place the double discourse of inside and outside, just as other islands do.
What else do we know about the Greek geographical imagination, and how does it relate to the images and conceptions of thinking the Mediterranean, laid out in the introduction to this volume? Whereas Baricco’s ocean sea stops at a certain point, the ancient “ocean sea” falls into two parts, ocean and sea, with okeanos ostensibly far less limited. Or rather, as opposed to the body of water designated as the sea, okeanos signifies the porous boundary of the known (Mediterranean) sea: in Homer and other epic and archaic poetry, okeanos is the mythical river that circles around the three known continents (Europe, Asia and Libya, or Africa), and out of which and into which any known water flows. Homer’s shield of Achilles, like an island in its own right, represents an entire cosmos with ocean covering its outer rim (Il. 18.478-608). Later, okeanos also comes to mean the outer boundless sea beyond the pillars. Even if this mapping of ocean is of course not without dissenting voices between Homer and the Hellenistic period (Herodotus, prominently, doubts the veracity of ocean, as well as the accuracy of visualizing it; Hist. 2.23; 4.8; 4.36), the concept proved remarkably persistent, not least as a metaphor (Romm 1992:12-26; 43f.). The Roman rhetorician Quintilian, for example, following a Hellenistic conceit that links poetry to water, classifies Homer as the source and reservoir for all kinds of later poetry, just as rivers flow from and back to the ocean: “For just as Ocean, according to Homer himself, gives rise to the current of all rivers and fountains, so Homer supplies a model and a starting point for every branch of eloquence” (Inst. Orat. 10.1.46). In order to visualize tradition, a spatial image is perfectly mapped onto a temporal one.1

Horden and Purcell have made it clear that the Mediterranean as a term is not attested before Isidore of Seville uses it in the sixth century AD, and that the sea which ocean supplies between the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa was known variably as “our sea”, the “great sea” or the “inland sea” (Horden and Purcell 2000:10f.). The Peutinger Table, a thirteenth-century copy of a late Roman map of the Roman world, depicts the Mediterranean, and its rivers as extensions, in the shape of an elongated, thin strip of water running along an East-West axis, its close edges crowded by the known territories

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1 Fabian 2002 [1983] has critiqued the conflation of spatial and temporal concepts as an operative strategy in the practice of anthropology. The consequences for Mediterranean anthropology, where the acknowledgement of the past plays such a large role, are particularly significant.
of the Roman oikoumene.\textsuperscript{2} The sea-journeys of the Greco-Roman world, likewise, were undertaken and thought of as linear pathways, hugging the shore and islands, close enough to each other and to the shore, so as never to make the crossing of open water unnecessarily long. The practice and subsequently the literary and geographical genre of the periplous, or linear circumnavigation, is not only a genre of ambivalence as the path often leads onwards alongside increasingly unknown territory (as in the regions beyond Gibraltar and the Pillars of Hercules), but it also follows a path that moves on the thin line between terra firma and the liquid sea, between the visible and the invisible, between the familiar to the one side and the unknown to the other, even if not always in that order.\textsuperscript{3}

This movement along the still familiar, or at least solid, may seem at first sight very different from the ex-centric paths of the Odyssey, that foundational tale of Mediterranean crossings and wanderings, where the familiar is repeatedly out of reach. The Odyssey, however, is a scenario of extremes. Its paths cross a fantastic, remote geography, whose seascapes and landscapes, alone and in relation to each other, intensify the significance a more familiar journey would have (cf. Purves 2006). And while the Odyssey is to a large extent about encountering counter-models, it is also about a sequence of stations and ports of call, which are constituted by its ‘medi-terranean’ voyage.\textsuperscript{4} Such sailing and journeying between two elements is therefore a marker of the fantastic as much as of the daily experience of relating to the sea.

The close sailing along the boundary between the known and the unknown also opens up a play with the wide and the narrow. The periploi edging along the coast increase a sense of the sea as a place of passages: not simply a passage as a crossing or traversing, but as a

\textsuperscript{2} Bowersock 2005 distinguishes between the East-West axis as a model favoured by scholarship, as opposed to a tradition of a North-South trajectory dear to travellers and artists. For the standard ancient West-East orientation, from the Pillars of Hercules to India, see e.g. Juvenal, Sat. 10.1-3; Aristotle, Meteor. 2.362b; Pindar, Nem. 4.69).

\textsuperscript{3} In the case of the African periploi mentioned by Herodotus (see below), the sea and the mode of sailing remain familiar, while the territory is not.

\textsuperscript{4} The question whether the Odyssey’s geography is real or fantastic and poetic, is an ancient one already. Among the ‘realists’, the Western Mediterranean, and Sicily in particular, became the main area of attention (Romm 1992:184f.).
tight channel (closer to the notion of an isthmus): not just a threshold (or barzakh, as
Taieb Belghazi suggests in the present volume), but a poros. A poros, geographically, is
first and foremost a strait; but it is also a term of resourcefulness and ingenuity, as in the
personification of Poros, the mythical father of Eros in Plato’s Symposium: movement,
and movement through confinement and condensation, are generative and constitutive of
cultural identity. But one can pass through a strait as much as travel across one, from land
to land. In that case, facilitation and difficulty are close by: how matter-of-fact, and yet
how significant such regular crossings were, is maybe evidenced by the archaic poet
Hesiod’s famous distaste for seafaring, which he treats as a necessary evil rather than a
desirable cultural asset. As a self-proclaimed reluctant seafarer, Hesiod has only once left
land, crossing over the very short distance separating Aulis, on the Greek mainland, from
the island of Euboea (Works and Days, 649-52). Yet this is not any passage: it is the same
poros where the Achaean army, or rather the disparate, various Greek armies, gathered on
the way to Troy, at the far side of the Mediterranean sea. This thronged strait is the site
where a foundational act of Greek culture took place, and where much subsequent
narrative about Greek identity was quite literally set in motion. Just as the Mediterranean
may best be studied in terms of its micro-regions, the meaningful ancient sea, likewise, is
not so much about the wide open expanse, as about the small-scale, about the passage
between blockage and expansion. Ancient Mediterranean thinking constitutes itself
within the reach and view of the referential and familiar.

Horden and Purcell point out that, map-making notwithstanding, the Mediterranean as a
whole was invisible until the advent of satellite technology (2000:10). The Mediterranean
has therefore been a “geographical expression originating at a learned, somewhat
abstract, level” (10). Of course, this applies to most expanses of land or sea. Benedict
Anderson’s famous Imagined Communities is about the strategies of conceptualizing the
nation state, often in the absence of a clearly defined or clearly visible territory, so as to
render it an experiential category for its citizens. But to what extent does this apply to the

5 Symp. 203b-c. Plato’s Poros, at the Olympian celebration of Aphrodite’s birth, is prostrate and
immobilized by drink, which allows Penia (Poverty) to take advantage of him in order to conceive Eros. A
geographical poros, likewise, is something that needs to be made use of, traversed and overcome, in order
to progress.
sea? The Mediterranean is not only not one single, national territory; the question must be: is it a territory at all?\(^6\)

*The Corrupting Sea* has been promised a second, follow-up volume entitled *The Liquid Continent* (forthcoming Horden and Purcell 2007), and it is exactly the operative, and relative boundary between solid and liquid that has a function in thinking the sea. Thinking the Mediterranean from a modern scholarly perspective has largely been a question of exploring metaphors, and it is that of the “doughnut around the hole” that has generated quite a few responses (Fentress and Fentress 2001; cf Purcell 2003:9-29). The image tries to capture the idea of a defining hole in the middle, and objections have been articulated on the grounds that the “doughnut” would render the surrounding land too uniform (Purcell 2003). But what is more, the “hole” is not ever really an empty space either. The liquid is not a void, but rather a lesser solidity: a space of “wet paths” (Homer’s *keleutha hygra*), rather than dry ones. A long tradition of natural philosophy had seen the relation between the basic elements of water, land, air, and aether as one of relative density; but it is when the boundary between them is dissolved that unfamiliar, dangerous space is created: ancient geographical writers (such as the Carthaginian Himilco, reported in Avienus’ fourth-century *Ora Maritima*) repeatedly describe the sea outside the pillars as gooey and vacuous, and ocean, surrounding the known world, as shallow, torpid, and sluggish (Romm 1992:21ff.). Pythis of Marseille, journeying around 300 BC, describes the Atlantic, that is the northernmost reaches of the sea beyond the pillars, as quite literally unsettling: “in these regions there obtained no longer earth as such, nor sea, nor air, but a kind of mixture of these, similar to a sea-lung [i.e. a jelly-fish], in which ... earth, sea, and everything else is held in suspension; this substance is like a fusion of them all, and can neither be trod upon nor sailed upon” (Polybius, *Histories* 34.5.3-4). The lack of boundaries, literally the inability to stand on firm ground or sail on liquid water, makes the territory alien, disorienting and non-functional. The

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\(^6\) Interestingly, Anderson’s starting point is Indonesia, itself a territorial formation of an archipelago nature, that is shaped by the sea as much as by the land.
Mediterranean, by comparison, is a navigable sea with a firm ‘place’ in the imagination, across which communication is possible.

Still, the dissolution of boundaries and the subsequent transgression encroaches upon “our sea” as well. In the *Phaedo*, Plato’s frog and pond simile is followed by a striking passage about the disorientation still manifest within the zones of sea, land and air. As part of a mythical account of the afterlife of the immortal souls and their abode in a higher region of the earth, Plato introduces an upper world, above the known cosmology and geography, that suggests startling analogies with its earthly counterpart, based on inversions of its experience and logic:

Now we do not realize that we live in the hollows [made by the seas], but we think we live on the surface of the earth, just as if someone who lives in the depth of the ocean thought he lived on the surface of the sea, and, seeing the sun and the stars through the water, he would think the sea was the sky; and because of his sluggishness and weakness, he has never reached the surface of the sea, and never saw, rising and lifting his head out of the water into our upper world, how much purer and more beautiful it is than the world he lived in, nor has he ever heard from anyone who saw it (109b-d).

The upper region of aether is to us what air is to the sea, as we live as if under the sea, only rarely coming up like fish to break through to the surface into a higher reality (109e). Likewise, as water and brine corrupt what can live in the sea, our world is corrupted by mud and matter. Compared to our potential, we are sea creatures confined in our medium. In a rewrite of the cave simile, the sea and abyss take the place of the interior space of shadows, from which transgression becomes transcendence. This is certainly in line with Plato’s general suspicion of the sea as a corrupting, destabilizing

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7 Plato’s “pond” (*telma*), incidentally, denotes something much closer to a muddy swamp than to fresh water: a stagnant, sluggish body of liquid.
influence (which gave the title to Horden and Purcell’s study), threatening political, epistemological and ontological disorder as an “unbounded sea of unlikeness” (Politicus 273d6; Purcell 2003). The sea, in this imagination, is transitory; passage through it, vertically as much as horizontally, has at best the metaphorical function to increase vision.

Still, the relative physical and (as far as Plato is concerned) metaphysical ‘thin-ness’ of the sea makes it qualitatively different from land not only in a lesser, but also in a positive sense: in the sense of being a less densely inhabited, and hence less troublesome, territory. A striking example is detectable in the work of Herodotus. In his investigation of Greek-Barbarian conflict, that is a cultural geography as much as work of history, he recounts how Aristagoras, the tyrant of Miletus arrives at Sparta, in order to enlist help for the Ionian Greeks facing Persian conquest, bringing with him “a bronze chart on which was engraved a map of the whole earth, showing every stretch of sea and all the rivers” (Hist. 5.49.1). By way of this map he visualizes the threat of conquerors from the East, bolstering his argument with the sheer density of territories already under Persian rule:

‘I should go on to explain that they live next to one another. Here are the Ionians, and then next to them – here – are the Lydians, whose land is fertile and rich in silver’. As he spoke, Aristagoras pointed to the map of the earth engraved on the chart he had brought with him. ‘And here’, he went on, ‘just to the east of the Lydians are the Phrygians, who have more flock of animals, and richer harvests, than any other country I know of. Next to the Phrygians are the Cappadocians – or Syrians, as we call them. Their neighbours are the Cilicians, whose territory stretches down to the sea here, where Cyprus is – that’s this island here’ (5.49.1-7).

The territories of more vassal states of Persia, the Armenians, Matineans, then Cissia and finally Susa, where the Great King lives, complete the run. The empire stretches down to
the seashore and even extends a greedy arm into it receiving tribute from Cyprus. There is something strangely threatening and unwholesome in this densely packed arrangement of societies. Compared to the geographical immensity of the East, the huge affront of its political system, and the enormity of its reach, the sea is a much less history- and people-packed zone that links the Ionians to the promise of Greek support.

The plight of the Ionians, and their plea for help across the relatively available open road of the sea, acquires meaning in relation to their colonizing mother cities: the Ionian cities are originally Greek foundations. Recent classical scholarship has not only focused on the practice, archaeology and ideology of colonization, but also on its logic with regard to the Mediterranean as the space separating colonies from their mother states (Malkin 1998; Morris 2003). With colonization and the rise of the polis (city-state) running in tandem, this logic involves the creation of stacked identities combining the local with the pan-Hellenic, at home as much as abroad in the new settlements, which in turn maintained contact with their founding communities, often through attendance at pan-Hellenic festivals. In Malkin’s account it is distance, that is distance across the sea, that creates the virtual center, in this case a Greece constituting itself with a pan-Hellenic identity, in order to make sense of more than one place at the same time (Malkin 2003).

To achieve this form of connectivity, sea travel of course is instrumental. The painter Plasson, another of Baricco’s seekers on the seashore, has abandoned a career in portraiture for painting the sea with seawater. He has not yet been able to find the starting point from which to fix its character, until he realizes that, just as a portrait starts from the eyes, an image of the sea has to start from its ships – rather than, for example, its islands. Mediterranean thought, likewise, as thought ‘between lands’ is both about assuming a perspective and keeping that perspective in motion, a perspective that is gained through acts of traversing. Ships, in fact, little mobile islands themselves, act as tokens of civilization, as they mean the ability to navigate and negotiate uncivilized territory. A case in point are the Odyssey’s Cyclopes, who neither have them, nor would know how

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8 Making sense of more than one place at the same time, in fact, amounts to “one of ancient historiography’s primary preoccupations” (Purcell 2003:16, with reference to Polybius 1.4).
to build or use them (Od. 9.125-130). Mobility, however, comes at a price, and is not free from certain unease. Just as the Cyclops learns to his detriment (and the loss of both his eye and his credibility), what dangers passing seafarers can bring, so Herodotus, in the opening section of his Histories, makes long-distance seafaring partly responsible for the lasting intercultural conflict between Greeks and non-Greeks:

According to learned Persians, it was the Phoenicians who caused the conflict. Originally, these people came to our sea from the Red Sea, as it is known. No sooner had they settled in the land they still inhabit than they turned to overseas travel. They used to take Egyptian and Assyrian goods to various places, including Argos, which was at the time the most important state, in all respects, in the country which is now called Greece. Once, then, the Phoenicians came to Argos and began to dispose of their cargo. Five or six days after they had arrived, when they had sold almost everything, a number of women came down to the shore, including the king’s daughter, whose name (as the Greeks agree too) was Io, the daughter of Inachus. These women were standing around the stern of the ship, buying any items which particularly caught their fancy, when the Phoenicians gave the word and suddenly charged at them. Most of the women got away, but Io and some others were captured. The Phoenicians took them on to their ship and sailed away for Egypt (1.1).

The Greeks, still according to the Persian version, next abduct the princess Europa from the Phoenician city of Tyre. They then sail on to Kolchis and the Phasis river in the far east of the navigable Mediterranean sea, and there abduct Medea. The foundation is laid for retaliation and Paris’s later abduction of Helen, at which point Herodotus is back with the sequence of the Trojan War as the prehistory of all later conflict. The Phoenicians, Herodotus adds, the third party that was at the origin of the conflict, but subsequently somehow quietly left the scene, deny that they abducted Io in the first place, thus erasing their place in the genealogy of conflict. In the sequence of abductions across the sea that
creates history, it is the origins that are corrupted and that despite the wealth of conflicting and converging accounts remain ultimately unsettled.

The fluctuation between different viewpoints and versions, here those of the Persians, Greeks, and the elusive Phoenicians regarding their initial sea-crossings, is one of Herodotus’ key strategies. What is more, it corresponds to the two main factors which he identifies as the forces of events over time, and which also form the structuring principles of his narrative: one is kinship and, by extension, genealogy; the other is reciprocity (tisis) as a principle of action and reaction, a pendulum of flow and counter-flow. This waving motion with an explicatory force attaches even to Herodotus’ position as a writer and collector of evidence himself. In the biographical tradition that is ascribed to Herodotus we find another displacement across the sea, that originally enables him to tell his story, even though it is, tellingly, not mentioned by him: being himself from Asia Minor, Herodotus was thought to have been exiled from Halicarnassus to the island of Samos, after taking part in a revolt against the Persian-supported tyrant Lygdamis. On his subsequent travels he eventually reaches Athens, from where he volunteers in an Athenian-led pan-Hellenic colonial venture at Thurii in Southern Italy in 444/3 BC, where he may have died also, thus spanning a good part of the known sea East to West, and a good part of current approaches to that sea, in his own biographical trajectory. It is an unmentioned initial conflict that makes Herodotus the displaced writer of the Histories that he is; and it is the fame and success of his works, especially in Athens, that eventually leads to him being asked to read from them at one of the most important pan-Hellenic festivals, the Olympic Games (Lucian, Hdt. 1): the directionality of Greek culture across the distant sea and back to a new center has come full circle in the life of Herodotus as it was told.

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9 This includes a fluctuating spectrum of appreciation, too. The Phoenicians, for example, are also singled out for bringing the alphabet to the Greeks (5.58); in many ways they are a close model for the achievements of the Greeks, in terms of trading, seafaring, and colonizing.

10 The biographical material derives largely from the tenth century Suda and other late sources. The tradition is almost certainly modelled on his texts rather than on accurate factual information, but that only underlines that the life of a traveller and colonizer was considered entirely appropriate for his oeuvre.
The edges of civilization

If Herodotus knows about the necessity and ambivalence of maritime connectivity relatively close to home, he complements this pattern with a similar one extending even further afield. The account of conflict between Greeks and non-Greeks, stretching over nine books and ranging from the mythological and early Persian expansionism down to the stirrings of inner-Greek antagonism in the decades after the Persian Wars, is interspersed with a great deal of well-placed ethno-geographical material, that follows his principles of inquiry into almost all corners of the known world. In particular, there are two long excursus, one on Egypt looking south (book two), and the other on Scythia in the far north (book four), either side of the main thoroughfare of Greek mobility at sea (see Hartog 1998; Thomas 2000).

Embedded in book four is a collection of information on circumnavigations of Libya, that is to say continental Africa (4.42-3); according to one source, a successful periplous is credited, again, to the Phoenicians (even if this time without global conflict in their wake); while another account knows of that route only as a form of punishment, here for the crime of a certain Sataspes, who, instead of being executed for a rape he committed, is sent by king Xerxes on a mission, supposedly harsher than death, to sail once around Libya and report back upon his return. When Sataspes cannot proceed and turns back halfway, he is put to death back in Persia nonetheless. What is more, Herodotus claims that although he knows well the name of his local informer about this story, “of my own I will leave it out (lit.: I forget it)” (4.43). Once more, a story about a sea voyage with dangerous consequences has a deliberate void at its original centre, when Herodotus refuses to authorize it through a name.

The account also tinges the episode that follows shortly after, of the exceptional Scythian Anacharsis, who journeys through Greece to observe and learn from the Greeks. Returning to his immature people of the far North (the Scythians were reputed to be the youngest race), he is caught performing a rite to the foreign Great Goddess Cybele, in
fulfillment of a vow he made when putting in at a festival at one of her shrines on the way. Arousing suspicion, he pays for this display of alien cults with his life (4.76-77). The return home from travel as a time and place of danger is a motive in Greek writing as well (Rutherford 1995); but the story of Scythian short-sightedness could in Herodotus’ universe happen only on the remote edges of the known world, as opposed to the general flexibility and mobility displayed by his Greeks.

As opposed to being ‘mere’ excursus, therefore, Egypt and Scythia mark the boundary with legend, as border zones of the Greek world, in which history too is confronting its most palpable frontiers. This is not only history (from Greek historein) in the Herodotean and lexical sense of ‘inquiry’, which, the further it is away, the more it has to rely on speculation and hear-say; the far North and South and their peoples are also the two zones where the expansionism of the Persian rulers is eventually contained, where every effort to conquer ends in defeat or madness.

The Greek conceptual map of the Mediterranean sea is therefore keyed to a map of the civilized world. Even though, proximity to the sea does not simply equal an increase in civilization: rather, distance from the sea means an increase in difference (see Bowersock 2005:174f.). In Herodotus’ case, this means that the zone in which Greek activity is strongest, lies mid-way on a North-South axis ranging from extreme immaturity and resistance to influence to the extreme antiquity and venerability of Egypt. Both foreign cultures are extreme, highly different from Greece and from each other, and in their orientation unchanged as much as unchanging. In the case of Egypt, it is this very unchangedness that provokes reverence. But, just as in modern travel accounts of Greece, or other Mediterranean places with an ostensibly ancient tradition, it is the discovery of unchanged continuity that allows to keep those places safely fixed, as opposed to the malleable traveling self. Herodotus’ ethnographic strategies of “mirroring” (Hartog 1998), of comparison and inversion (the Egyptians are in many of their customs and in

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11 On the mythical traits of the inhabitants of the very extreme North and South (from the Hyperboreans to the Ethiopians), and their long tradition as a topos, see Romm 1992:45-81.
12 E.g. 1.201ff. on Cyrus failing against the Massagetae; 4.123ff. on Darius passing just about unscathed through Scythian territory; 3.30ff. on Cambyses’ madness on the Ethiopian campaign.
most of their natural environment the exact opposite of the Greeks) have in fact been likened to the self-centered, in this case Helleno-centric, gaze of the tourist (Redfield 1985). Herodotus’ Helleno-centricity, though, assumes mobility and its dangers as its dominant characteristic, as opposed to the stability and rigidity of other cultures they encounter, and it is a mobility that increases the closer one comes to the sea lying between the North and the South.

Mobility brings its own dangers. The unchangingness of the sea, however, or the lack of movement it can impose while being itself constantly and restlessly in motion, are no less of a threat. In the space of the sea, enforced mobility and immobility can easily turn into each other and destabilize the notion of controlled movement. Islands, again, stage that boundary. Ariadne, for example, is abandoned and immobilized on the island of Naxos after her flight from Crete, out to sea, with Theseus. According to one mythical tradition she is rescued by Dionysos, himself a traveling god; according to another, she is killed by Artemis, who herself is in turn bound into a story of unsettling wandering and half-civilized settling across the sea: both her and her brother Apollo are born to their mother Leto on the remote and inhospitable island of Delos; Delos, a floating island, takes root only after it has offered shelter to Leto, desperately driven about to hide from the anger of Hera.

Within that same sea, other zones of undeveloped or inverted civilization also lie in wait. Hermes, the traveling god and messenger, when sent to Calypso’s remote island to announce that she ought to let Odysseus go, complains that nobody would willingly speed over so great an expanse of seawater (Od. 5:100-1). Hermes’ complaint underlines that divine speeding in this case seems to be the only available mode of transportation – Odysseus is immobilized after the loss of his vessel and crew, and his gazing onto the sea, even if it turned into a frequent topos of Romantic painting, is a far cry from solitary contemplation (Od. 5:84; 156-8). Instead, it shows him at his most unsociable: cut off from his companions, and cutting himself off from an at best alternative living on
Calypso’s island, this is the paralysis of abandonment mirrored in the water’s expanse, rather than a transcendental longing.\textsuperscript{13}

A slightly later manifestation of such sea-gazing, as an indication of proper sociability gone awry, is the “Cyclops in love” of Hellenistic poetry. In Theocritus’ \textit{Idylls}, we find him on the seashore looking out and neglecting his duties as a shepherd (11.17f; further Hunter 1999:215-43). In love with the sea nymph Galatea, the cyclops seeks a remedy for unrequited love in song. What makes his predicament worse is his inability even to swim (11.60ff.), which maroons him not only in his unhappy longing, but renders him, in his immobility, outright anti-social. In Plato’s \textit{Laws} (3.689d3), “knowing neither letters nor how to swim” is used as a proverbial phrase for ignorance of the simplest tasks, which leaves the love-struck Cyclops as much of an anti-citizen as his Homeric forebears who would not even know what to do with a ship.

Whatever consolation his mental mobility may be, the stranded Cyclops is an outsider in a world where skill to navigate the sea one way or another is valued. His inability to approach the sea and its creatures with any gain makes the Cyclops recognizable and guarantees his function as a literary figure. Navigating the danger zones of ignorance and incivility when it comes to cultural contact, likewise, is both topic and strategy of inquiry for Herodotus. He himself claims to have traveled to at least some of the places that play a part in his narrative, and the question how Herodotus the traveler and Herodotus the historian relate has been exercising his commentators since antiquity.\textsuperscript{14} However factual his own travel may have been, the relationship between inquiry and travel or wandering is strongly thematized throughout the \textit{Histories}, and it is a link that is not peculiar to Herodotus either.\textsuperscript{15} In terms of the prominence which the \textit{Histories} achieved, however,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} The seashore, where it is not inhabited, is generally considered a (literary) place of solitude, right on the edge between land and sea; examples in Montiglio 2005:7.n.1.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Plutarch, in \textit{On the Malice of Herodotus}, calls him an outright liar; Thucydides and Aristotle consider him a mere storyteller, rather than a “serious” historian. A long line of interpretation, reaching into the 1960s, views Herodotus as progressing from a traveller and geographer to becoming a historian of the Persian Wars. More recently, Herodotus has been re-read in the light of the history of anthropology and anthropological writing.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} On Hecataeus and Democritus as figures singled out for the link between inquiry and wandering, see Montiglio 2000:89. On Odyssean role-play and inquiry, with particular reference to Herodotus, see Montiglio 2005:118-146.
\end{itemize}
Herodotus can stand as the arch “ex-centric native”, who makes that very experience of excentricity the basis of the investigation which gives history its name.

Theôria to theory

Not every kind of wandering leads across the sea, and not every wandering leads to knowledge. But some kinds of travel, and their relation to knowledge, are particularly suitable to encourage speculation about the range and method of “thinking and writing the Mediterranean”. One of them is the practice of theôria.

The Greek terminology for “wandering” (planasthai, alasthai), such as in the wandering of Odysseus, derives from a passive sense of being sent off one’s path, and there is “a general pattern in Greek thought: to conceive wandering as the result of an external force that drives body and mind away from their normal course” (Montiglio 2000:88). The outcome even of undesired wanderings can still be knowledge, but there are also more deliberate forms of travel, with a clearer structure attached to them. Herodotus tells us of one of them:

While Croesus was increasing the Lydian empire, Sardis was at the height of its prosperity and was visited on occasion by every learned Greek who was alive at the time, including Solon of Athens. Solon had drawn up laws for the Athenians, at their request, and then spent ten years abroad. He claimed to be travelling to see the world, but it was really to avoid having to repeal any of the laws he had made. The Athenians could not do it by themselves, since they were bound by solemn vows to try out for a period of ten years whatever laws Solon would set for them. So that – as well as seeing the world – is why Solon was abroad from Athens (1.29-30).
Theôria, the term used for Solon’s travel (as much as for that of the Scythian Anacharsis; see Hartog 2001:108-116), marks a recognizable cultural practice, which includes not only the individual travel in order to acquire knowledge, but is more broadly a structured act of spectating carried out by a delegation or an individual.16 In this sense it is also one of the most conspicuous forms of pilgrimage in classical Greece (Elsner and Rutherford 2006:12). Usually, theôria designates a delegation sent by a city-state, even if there is also private theôria. A theôria is expected to involve movement outside the boundaries of the city state’s territory, and civic delegations would most prominently be dispatched to festivals and sanctuaries, whether to city festivals (such as the Great Dionysia in Athens) or panhellenic festivals and athletic competitions, such as the Olympic or Delphic Games. In addition, delegates (theôroi) are sent to oracular sites, and to remote sanctuaries independent of a festival (Nightingale 2004:40-71). As non-local delegates, the theôroi participate, yet participate not fully, in the activities they have come to witness, while they also enjoy a special, inviolate status both during their journey and their stay, from which they are expected to return home with an official account (Elsner and Rutherford 2006:12-4).

The detachment from the city and community that is involved in any such act is, of course, not without its dangers either. Rutherford 1995, speaking of “theoric crisis”, lists a series of mishaps that can befall either on the way or upon return. Plato, unsurprisingly, is as suspicious of its shortcomings as he is of the disorder of the sea. His Megalopolis, while admitting and sending delegations, would make sure that the returning theôroi report immediately, so that any information dangerous to his ideal city could be withheld from the citizens, while the delegates, in that case, would have to remain permanently sequestered from their community (Laws 950d-952c).

The threat of strict censure and permanent exclusion, for sure, is a particularly Platonic take on the civic practice of theôria. And yet, the detachment implied in theôria associates it particularly strongly with forms of suspension. As Herodotus and other

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16 On the joint etymology from roots denoting the sacred and the visual, see Rutherford 2000:133-8.
sources tell us, changes to Solon’s laws are suspended while the lawmaker is away (Ker
2000:315ff.). So are certain other acts at home: the dialogue with Socrates in prison, that
is the content of Plato’s *Phaedo*, is made possible only because on the day after Socrates’
trial a delegation to Delos has left, until whose return the city must remain pure and no
public executions may take place. The delegation’s distance from its community, that
allows Socrates’ life and teaching to continue for another while, matches the distance
separating Socrates from the city state that has just condemned him to death. It is no
accident that Plato is especially relevant in the remodeling of the language of *theôria* as a
civic practice to *theôria* as a staple of philosophical terminology in order to defend the
discipline of philosophy under that name, a change that takes place with great force in the
fourth century BC (Nightingale 2004; 2006). Borrowing from the language and role of
social and political practice, philosophical *theôria*, that is mental speculation above and
beyond social interaction, becomes a form of supreme wisdom in its own right.\(^{17}\)

How, then, does the practice of *theôria* relate to thinking the Mediterranean? There is at
least one instance where Plato combines the language of the sea and the language of
spectating. Socrates’ speech in the *Symposion* describes the ascent towards Beauty,
proceeding from an initial vision of specific beauty, for example that of a beautiful boy,
towards the beauty of many more things and in a more general sense, and finally towards
the idea of Beauty itself. The confrontation with the full extent of beauty beyond the
individual instance, which is to trigger new insights, Plato likens to the act of “watching
(*theorôn*) the great sea of beauty” (210d4), choosing a term for the sea (*to polu pelagos*)
that is habitually used to stand in for any great expanse or quantity. This stage of
observing the sea is not yet the final stage of accessing beauty itself, of seeing pure
forms. The sea becomes the perfect image for the zone in which a world of particulars is
gradually transcended, in which still inhabiting and already observing, like the double
vision of the island, are lying closely side by side, where the familiar is still at hand, but
where the boat is already pushed out into the open. It is a middling zone of release from

\(^{17}\) The actual shape and relative standing of philosophical *theôria* can vary greatly; see Nightingale 2004 on
the differing accounts of Plato, Aristotle and some of their successors.
one kind of corrupting particularity, and a passage towards the acquisition of new knowledge, and for Plato, clearly, it is not the stage one would ultimately want to stop at.

For *theôria* as a cultural practice, however, and as the inspiration for a reading strategy of the ancient Greek Mediterranean, this Platonic halfway house may be the stage where we usually are. The travel and movement implicit in *theôria* can take place on land as much as on sea. Being at sea, though, and quite literally skirting the boundaries of what is unknown, encourages keeping knowledge in transit. That knowledge, by the logic of *theôria*, is to be kept from evaluation while it travels. It is to remain uninterpreted and unchanged, with nothing added or subtracted by the *theôroi*, as is for example the case with oracular information gained at Delphi (Theognis 805-10; see Ker 2000:317f.). This may sound like a far cry from Dainotto and Zakim’s endorsement of usury, of the overlap of waves and directions, and of the indistinguishability of origins. Still, *theôria* is a risky navigation, where keeping new knowledge both suspended and in motion may open precisely a Mediterranean space, a space between two units, for new thinking. As a pattern of linking travel and thinking, it includes travel in and across the Mediterranean. It is not exclusive to the Mediterranean, in so far as it is not about a notional unity or exceptionalism of the Mediterranean, which makes it appropriate for the place the Mediterranean holds in some of the Greek writing referred to here. It allows us, in other words, to lift the gaze above the chessboard, just as its practitioners, apart from the act of travel, are expected to participate in the rituals and spectacles to an extent, even if they do not do so fully.

If, with the editors of this volume, we are looking out for methods (in their Greek etymology literally “paths leading through”) of reading cultural contact, then *theôria* is a maneuver extending into the Mediterranean, during which contact happens but where the knowledge and articulation of that contact are momentarily suspended – or even permanently circumnavigated. According to Diogenes Laertius (1.62), Solon delayed and eventually died abroad, rather than ever realizing the return to Athens; Plutarch (*Lyc.* 29.5) tells a similar tale about the Spartan lawgiver Lykourgos, who starves himself to death abroad: both of them in their ex-centric travels are refusing the logic of
homecoming, the “loop of nostos” (Ker 2000:326; the term is Kurke’s). The incomplete journey, though, “is a fragment of structure or form that precisely through its irresolution becomes the telos at which it aimed” (Ker 2000:326). The journey that inhabits and observes traverses a liquid territory where boundaries shift and where origins disappear just like Herodotus’ Phoenicians from the account of subsequent hostilities. But for the time and space it is in transit, it withholds itself from being reported at home and from having its potentially corrupting knowledge translated into practice – and if you happen to be on the way from Athens to Delos and back, you might be saving a philosopher’s life for just that amount of time.

Works Cited


