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Michel Fontenay, *La Méditerranée entre la Croix et le Croissant: Navigation, commerce, course et piraterie (XVIe-XIX siècle)*. Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier, 2010. 425 pp. Illustrations, tables, graphs, figures, notes, and index. €54.77. (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-0090-2.

Review by Julia Landweber, Montclair State University.

A decade after 9/11, the history of relations between the worlds of Islam and the Christian West has become a publishing phenomenon, with ever more articles and books appearing on the subject with each passing year. The consensus of most such historians—especially among early modernists—is that neither the Saïdian thesis of Western dominance over a silently protesting East, nor the Huntington thesis of a perpetual “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam, accurately depicts the historical reality.[1] Long before the present crop of scholars got started, Michel Fontenay was arriving at these same conclusions in a prolific series of essays on Mediterranean maritime history which he has produced steadily over the past forty years. *La Méditerranée entre la Croix et le Croissant* brings together a selection of these essays which, along with a second forthcoming volume, will collectively showcase Fontenay’s life work. These pieces were originally published in proceedings, anthologies, and journals between 1975 and 2006, and in consequence many have become unduly difficult to access. A goal of the present publication is to remedy that situation (p. 9).

The book is divided into two parts. Part one focuses mainly on navigation and commerce, while part two takes on the *corso* and piracy. Chapter one, “La Méditerranée des temps modernes: les étapes d’une marginalization,” originally appeared in English in a 1993 volume on Maltese history. A synthesis of social and economic history, this essay serves the present volume as a general introduction for non-specialists to the history of the early modern Mediterranean. Fontenay admits that he included it mostly because so few students of history study the Mediterranean region in school these days, and therefore many may benefit from some orientation before proceeding deeper into the book. For scholars familiar with “l’oeuvre de Braudel et de la bibliographie méditerranéenne classique,” Fontenay recommends skipping ahead to chapter two (p. 23). But I respectfully disagree; this chapter merits reading for the insights it offers into the field of area studies, especially of a region as diverse (think of religious, cultural, linguistic and ethnic divisions) and yet unified (think of climate, cuisine, and historical conquests and colonizations) as the Mediterranean basin.

It is rare to read a history focused on the Mediterranean itself, as opposed to histories of the surrounding terrestrial zones. The idea was pioneered by Fernand Braudel of course, in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949/1966).[2] Fontenay, a willing disciple of Braudel, conceives of the early modern sea as a zone of experiences and cross-cultural contacts, as well as of crossings. It was the “coeur du vieux monde” and an “espace relationnel” (pp. 24-25). Rather than thinking of Latin Christendom and Islam as two separate worlds occasionally interacting at their borders through individual encounters or military clashes, scholars like Fontenay—as with Braudel—encourage us to re-envision the

Mediterranean world as it really was: a site of blended cultures and civilizations which encompassed and brought together southern Europe, North Africa, and the Near East.

In chapters two and three, Fontenay shifts his focus from the grand survey to the specific, with case studies of two sixteenth-century French travelers to the Near East. Chapter two explores a diary left by the canon Dom Loupvent from Lorraine, who sailed to the Holy Lands in 1531; chapter three focuses on a published travel account by the sieur de Villamont, a Knight of Jerusalem originally from Brittany, who in 1589-1590 decided to visit Rome but then just kept going, ultimately visiting Istanbul, the Holy Lands, and most unusually Egypt. Molly Greene recently observed, “[d]espite a tremendous amount of writing about Mediterranean commerce in the early modern period, surprisingly little has been written about the realities of travelling across the sea and the norms and customs that structured such crossings...” [3] These chapters fill in this lacuna with marvelous details about the pre-modern experience of European travellers who used the sea to move between the Christian West and the lands of Islam. In chapter two, Fontenay examines in great depth the practices of Mediterranean seafaring, the technical aspects of navigating at sea, the types of ships used, and the challenges of manning them. This chapter includes a series of excellent maps and diagrams as well. Two maps showing Venetian shipwrecks and lost ships along the Adriatic coast indicate how customary it was for ships to hug the coast rather than sail out of sight of land; how much more dangerous the coast was than open water; and the relative dangers of natural shipwrecks versus pirates (they were nearly equal, as it turns out, but nature was worse than man) (pp. 98-99).

In chapter three, Fontenay has fun with the more personal experiences of passenger life aboard ship, describing the precautions taken by Villamont when he boarded a Venetian pilgrim ship headed for Jaffa in the spring of 1589: “Prévenu de l’inconfort de ce monstre flottant, Villamont s’était fait faire un coffre de sapin avec un dessus rembourré de laine pour lui servir de couche. Il s’était installé en poupe, où le vent soufflé de tous côtés mais où l’on est préservé de la pluie et des embruns, et surtout à distance de l’équipage, couvert de vermine, et des odeurs nauséabondes qui montent de la cale” (p. 130).

Fontenay also lets us hear Villamont in his own words, on how to treat sea-sickness and related problems: “...Si vous tombez malade sur la mer à cause des vomissements (que vous y faites quelquefois jusques au sang), il est bon de porter sur soi quelque chose confortative: premièrement un peu de gingembre confit pour échauffer l’estomac après le vomissement, puis quelques douzaines de noix muscade, de clou de girofle, deux ou trois onces de cannelle et autre épicerie battues.... Arrivant une tempête, qui provoquât à vomir par le branlement de la nave, il sera bon de vous retirer au milieu de la nave pour ce que l’on y est moins tourmenté. Et pour ce que souvent on y est constipé pour le changement d’air et le mail qu’on y endure, sera bien fait d’avoir quelques drogues laxatives” (p. 131). Clearly early modern sea-travel was not easy, even for better-heeled passengers like Villamont.

Chapter four combines two studies from 1994 and 2006 on European commerce in the Levant during the seventeenth century. Fontenay returns to the point of chapter one, which is to demolish any notion there had ever been a clear distinction between something called Europe and something else called *le monde islamique*. On both geographic and religious grounds, nomenclature is a challenge when trying to distinguish these two regions (pp. 151-152). Call them what you like, many groups of Europeans maintained a steady trade with the great Ottoman ports. The French alone, for example, in the late seventeenth century regularly purchased large quantities of cotton, silk, angora, and linen; dyes; coffee and spices; wheat and

rice; and other goods. The Ottomans, in turn, bought such things as lead and tin from the English; other metals from Germany, via Venetian and Dutch intermediaries; American colonial products (sugar, indigo, cochineal) from the French; and Murano glass from Venice (pp. 189-190). As a more technical economic history, this chapter stands slightly apart from the rest of the book. Yet even within a dry survey of economic exchanges, one can see Fontenay's grand thesis shining through about the blended nature and ongoing interdependencies of the Mediterranean space. Even as the sixteenth-century colonization of the Americas and European entry to the Indian Ocean relegated the Mediterranean basin to a less than central role in the world economy, local trade continued both to flourish and to flexibly open up to New World products such as tobacco and cane sugar, and later, coffee.

Part two moves into the realm of corsairs and pirates, the subject which originally propelled Fontenay into studying the Mediterranean. When he first stumbled onto Mediterranean piracy as a legitimate research topic in the late 1960s, little serious scholarship existed on it. This is no longer true, thanks in good part to Fontenay's work published over the past forty years. Beginning in an era marked by the war in Algeria, Fontenay had to fight against the then common image of wicked Barbary pirates matched against the Knights of Malta, admired by western historians as "les derniers des croisés" (p. 11). Skeptical of this simplistic (not to mention one-sided) black-hat/white-hat vision, Fontenay developed a theory of mirroring *course-piraterie* practices. He argued that the Knights of Malta and St. Stephen were essentially Catholic pirates and that the Muslim pirates of the Barbary coast were their moral, but also economic, equivalents. While each attacked the other religion's ships under pretext of fighting a holy war against the infidel, in reality both had become key elements in the shaping of an early modern Mediterranean identity.

However, this theory of equivalence proved flawed numerically. In a typical year during the height of the *corso*, in the seventeenth century, Malta, Sicily, and Monaco might send out forty ships, whereas the Muslim states of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli would send out nearly 120 ships. Fontenay's insight was that this "divergence d'intensité" derived from economics, not religion (p. 12). Capitalism was at work in a most unlikely place: while being a corsair or pirate might profit the individual, collectively it was usually not profitable. By the seventeenth century, fewer western Europeans turned corsair because they were finding better opportunities for profit via legitimate commerce. However, their very success encouraged North African and Levantine piracy to continue, because of the rising number of prosperous merchant ships plying the seas offered many tempting victims to plunder.

Chapters five through nine work together better than the chapters of part one, as they collectively showcase Fontenay's sustained thinking on the history of early modern Mediterranean piracy. Chapter five usefully begins with the question of vocabulary (chapter seven, written twenty years later, takes it up as well). What distinguished a pirate from a corsair? A pirate was "un bandit qui opère pour son propre compte;" a corsair was too, but whereas the pirate was *hors-la-loi*, the corsair, like a privateer, was "reconnu par le droit des gens" and "il fait partie de la force armée du pays dont il bat pavillon" (p. 212). Yet Barbary pirates usually were authorized by the North African city-states which sent them out, and the Knights of Malta and of St. John regularly attacked Greek Orthodox Christian ships which were both subject to the Ottoman sultan and to some degree under protection by France and the Pope.[4] Fontenay concludes that the *corso* was "pratiqué un peu partout, un peu par tous" (p. 214).

Chapter six is a unique study of the economic aspects of the *corso* for both Malta and the Barbary states. Piracy might have been an adventure, but it was also a business that required the use of port towns both at the commencement and the conclusion of each outing. Here, as in chapter four, Fontenay again turns to statistics and figures to reveal the economics which unified early modern Mediterranean culture. Making creative use of archives from Malta and elsewhere, he addresses the little studied economics of piracy. Piracy involved manpower, ships, and provisions; when successful it took in ships, hard currency, slaves, and many diverse forms of merchandise (p. 307). Chapters seven, eight, and nine return to the question “Course ou Piraterie?”, but with more emphasis on the Barbary, Ottoman, and Greek points of view than the more general chapters five and six.

The volume in total is a wonderful compendium, but is not without flaws. Several chapters combine articles published over time (e.g. chapter seven blends articles from 1992, 1994, and 2006), and chapter five offers an updated bibliography, but the other chapters are mostly reprinted with little apparent revision. There are some limitations to this approach. One is stylistic: for example, “la Carrefour du vieux monde” is an evocative description of the Mediterranean, but it appears with identical purpose in two different chapters (pp. 24, 94); likewise the role of Venice in shipping Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land is explained in chapter two and again in chapter three. Another drawback is in the citations, which mostly reference an older historiography and display only limited awareness of recent contributions to the field. The bulk of the footnotes, even in the articles published in the twenty-first century, cite works published in the 1980s or earlier.[5] Even without revising the essays, it would have been useful to update the footnotes or provide a complementary bibliography for the entire book which could have included important new work in Mediterranean history by the likes of Molly Greene, Eric Dursteler, and Gillian Weiss, to name just a few notable examples.[6]

Those caveats aside, this book is both useful and a pleasure to read; Fontenay is a delightful writer and deeply knowledgeable about life at sea in the early modern Mediterranean. I might like him to be my tour guide on a voyage from Venice to Istanbul or Jerusalem, but the realities of early modern sea travel sound so dreadful that I feel fortunate to sit at home and read his essays amid the comforts of the twenty-first century, rather than take my chances on a sixteenth-century pilgrimage ship.

NOTES

[1] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

[2] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Translated by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1966; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 2 vols.

[3] Molly Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants: A Maritime History of the Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 8.

[4] Greene, *Catholic Pirates*, p. 109.

[5] Fontenay actually apologizes for this lapse in the first page of chapter one, and for chapter five, the oldest essay in the collection (originally published in 1975), he includes a complementary bibliography created in 2006, the year he began to assemble the present volume.

[6] See Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gillian Weiss, "Barbary Captivity and the French Idea of Freedom," *French Historical Studies* 28/2(2005): 231-264; and Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). While published too recently to be included in Fontenay's bibliographies, the following books would make marvelous companion reads alongside *La Méditerranée entre la Croix et le Croissant*: Greene, *Catholic Pirates and Greek Merchants* (cited above); Eric R. Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Christine Isom-Verhaaren, *Allies with the Infidel: The Ottoman and French Alliance in the Sixteenth Century* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); and Gillian Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2011).

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