

Braudel and Antiquity

Giovanna Ceserani

Stanford University

These remarks pose questions that reach beyond the period from 1550 to 1600, which is the stated chronological scope of Braudel's 1949 book, *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip II*. Of course, Braudel's revolutionary vision included relating multiple time scales that expanded well beyond 1550–1600 in order to investigate this period itself, but the questions I briefly posit here are: How have earlier periods been studied since Braudel's book came out, and what might come next? And what might be the intersections, if any, with how later times figure in his work?

Braudel himself pointed to antiquity as a time when the Mediterranean is best understood as a unity sustained by intense human mobility. “Mediterranean” is not an ancient term: it emerged only in the sixth century CE. The peoples living on its shores in antiquity—the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Phoenicians, and others—called it by different names. Yet, the first image in Braudel's book, the map encompassing the whole Mediterranean Basin and the Black Sea, which at once declares the significance of maps and figures for his approach and the scope of his work, would have been most familiar to the classical scholars among his 1949 original readers. Already in the nineteenth century the illustrated (and much debated) reconstructions of the geography of Odysseus's or the Argonauts' travels spanned the whole Mediterranean (see figure 1 for one such reconstruction meant to reflect ancient geographical knowledge), as was the case also for maps of archaic and classical Greek colonization, ranging from the Black Sea to Massalia (the ancient Marseilles) and beyond. Similar in scope are the maps used to illustrate the expansion of the Roman Empire, coloring to signal further Roman conquests of an increasing amount of the land masses surrounding the whole Mediterranean, which the Romans, in the end, simply called *Mare Nostrum*. The maps in Braudel, new as they were to many of his readers, resembled much the ones that have hung on the walls of Classics Departments ever since there were Classics Departments. Still, despite this inherent familiarity of scope, Braudel's book was a novelty that made big waves for scholars of antiquity when it appeared, and it motivated a major turn in the study of mobility and in network approaches to the ancient world.



Figure 1: Atlas Map, "Geographie des Grecs Primitive," by Conrad Malte-Brun (1775–1826), Aime Andre, Paris, 1837

It took over fifty years for the publication of a work that attempted something on the scale of Braudel's *Mediterranean*, and when such a book appeared it was one that looked backward to antiquity. In 2000 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell published *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*—covering three thousand years from prehistory to Middle Ages—and scholars of the ancient world were ready to engage with it because of their long engagements with Braudel.¹ In the quarter-century since its publication, ancient mobility studies continue to grow alongside debates that spur further research. How connected was the ancient Mediterranean, really? Did mobility make it into a single unity? And what different types of mobility does one find across the Mediterranean region? For the ancient world, books are being written, and large and well-funded European Research Council projects are being launched on mobility. An example is "Migration and the Making of the Ancient Greek World" (MIGMAG), whose language of "complex multidirectional and multiscalar movements" is Braudelian.²

Well before the publication of Horden and Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea*, archaeologists of the ancient Mediterranean adapted, used, and disseminated Braudel's *Mediterranean*. Among these researchers—who had no textual evidence at their disposal but were newly empowered by radiocarbon dating, and who had no access to individuals' stories, but a wealth of objects, material culture, and excavations for evidence—the multi-scale temporal approach resonated deeply. And so did Braudel's ability to tell a compelling story in which landscapes and not named individuals played a central role along with trade and exchanges rather than political events. Since the eighties, Braudel's most lyrical passages again and again appear in archaeological studies of

¹ Of the many reviews, see especially Brent D. Shaw, "Challenging Braudel: A New Vision of the Mediterranean," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 14 (2001): 419–53; see also Ian Morris, "Mediterraneanization," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 18, no. 2 (2003): 30–55, for an evaluation of connectivity in conceptions of the Mediterranean from Braudel to Horden and Purcell.

² Naoise Mac Sweeney, "The Making of a Mediterranean Network: The Retrospective Ethnogenesis of the Greeks," keynote lecture, European Archaeological Association annual meeting, Rome, August 28–31, 2024.

various Mediterranean regions—almost as if Braudel’s prose offered the words for these ancient periods for which there are no textual sources.

An astounding thing happened when a posthumous text appeared, which had the word Ancient in front of Mediterranean and was written by Braudel himself. *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World*, preserved only in manuscript for thirty years, was finally published in France in 1998 and in English translation in 2000, the same year as the *Corrupting Sea*. Braudel wrote this book by commission and relied on secondary studies—he wrote the full manuscript quickly in a few months in 1968 before many new discoveries changed crucial tenets of Mediterranean history. But, despite being obsolete in certain aspects, it is striking how well archaeologists received this work by Braudel. Cyprian Broodbank, a major figure in Mediterranean prehistory who was educated in the late eighties and early nineties on Braudelian paradigms, wrote of this publication as “this extraordinary windfall . . . this time-capsule of thought.”³ It contained mistakes, but was also a prescient work, anticipating, for example, that neolithic archaeological sites would be found on Cyprus and articulating the very concept of a laboratory island which became an important model for later scholars. In short, Braudel revealed the Mediterranean to be more than the sum of its parts already in deep antiquity. He presented the Late Bronze Age as an enduring web of cultural and commercial interactions of different scales, attending to large-scale regional economies and long-range trade alongside agriculture, both big and small. This approach offered an unparalleled model for how to write a prehistory of the Mediterranean. And where else could one find the scintillating use of appropriate and thought-provoking analogies: Late Bronze Age Ugarit as Genoa or even Venice, “Phoenicia as a booming ‘sheltered sector’ during the early Iron Age,” and “Egypt as 18th and then 19th century China”?⁴

On the very same two days we celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of Braudel’s *The Mediterranean*, just a few steps away on the Stanford campus, the ancient historians ran a thought-provoking conference on global antiquity in the Classics Department. Braudel and his approach came up there too—explicitly and implicitly. The comparative impulse and the focus on geography and deep structures were crucial to the discussion on the possibilities of a global ancient history, with Braudel invoked also as a model of visionary verve and institutional change volition—we might not be done with Braudel and the ancient world indeed.⁵

But what about the other end of Braudel’s chronological scope—the eighteenth century, where my own work on mobility lies these days? Paula Findlen introduced to the symposium discussion a later book by Braudel, *Out of Italy*, covering the period from 1560 to 1660, when, in his own words, Italy “beamed a radiance out beyond its own frontiers, a light that spread to every corner of the world.”⁶ In this work Braudel combines analyses of deeper structures with a

³ Cyprian Broodbank, “Braudel’s Bronze Age,” in *Cretan Offerings: Studies in Honour of Peter Warren*, *British School at Athens Studies* 18 (2010): 33–40, at 35.

⁴ Broodbank, “Braudel’s Bronze Age,” 36.

⁵ For the program of the 2024 conference *Global Antiquity: Making Progress?* organized by Walter Scheidel, Ian Morris, and Reviel Netz, see <https://classics.stanford.edu/events/global-antiquity-making-progress>. For Braudel as a model of institutional change, see Ian Morris, “Evolutionary History,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14747049211068279>. For relevance in recently published books, see Justin Leidwanger and Carl Knappett, eds., *Maritime Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Sarah C. Murray, *Long-Distance Exchange and Inter-Regional Economies* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁶ Fernand Braudel, *Out of Italy: Two Centuries of World Domination and Demise*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Europa Editions, 2019), 3. Originally published as *Le Modèle italien* (Arthaud, 1989).

narrative about growth and decline, setting in by the late seventeenth century. But recent decades have seen a reassessment of any such concept of decline for the Italian peninsula and, in fact, the Mediterranean at large. Paula Findlen herself has been at the forefront of reassessing Italy's eighteenth century.⁷ In the 2010 book *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*, Maria Fusaro illustrates how the Mediterranean sea remained critical well into the eighteenth century for any European power aiming at global supremacy, explaining the increasing British maritime presence there which was at an all-time high. Maria Fusaro adapts to the British of the late 1600s what Braudel had said of the Dutch: "So they swarmed into the Mediterranean like so many heavy insects crashing against the window panes—for their entry was neither gentle nor discreet."⁸

There is here an intersection between considerations of chronology and of mobility, and between cultural, social, and economic histories. The eighteenth century saw more travel to Italy than ever, in particular British—a wandering academy, in some people's idealized view, but also the seed of a later period's mass commercial tourism. This Grand Tour was a cultural phenomenon as much as it was an economic and infrastructural one—after all, the routes traveled and the modes of travel were the same. Eighteenth-century tourists sought the glory of ancient Italy, and soon enough that of Greece, eager to see with their own eyes and to bring back knowledge as well as ancient artifacts. Their earliest modern predecessor, though, was a merchant, for the first depiction of the Parthenon in Athens comes to us from Cyriac of Ancona (1391–1452), who traveled widely in the early fifteenth century and worked in the Greek seas of the Venetian empire on family business while documenting antiquities. Where are these types of merchants with their intellectual curiosities in Braudel's *Mediterranean*? And where are their successors, the tourists among the economic or intellectual elites of later times?

Hester Thrale Piozzi (1741–1821) was one of these tourists in Italy in 1786. The widow, who married an Italian singer in a scandal that alienated her close friend Samuel Johnson, traveled to the Italian peninsula with her new husband, eager to understand its "customs" and to see its antiquities and art—so eager, in fact, that she found more occasions to cite ancient authors than anyone ever had, even in the distinctly un-classical city of Florence. But of the Mediterranean, Piozzi was skeptical—and I end with her words comparing it to the English Channel: "Nor does the steady regularity of this Mediterranean sea make me inclined to prefer it to our more capricious or rather active channel. Sea views have at best too little variety, and when the flux or efflux of the tide are taken away from one, there remains only rough and smooth."⁹ There is such distance here from Braudel's confession, writing in the preface to his first edition of *The Mediterranean*: "I have loved the Mediterranean with passion, no doubt because I am a northerner like so many others in whose footsteps I have followed."¹⁰ When did we, northern or not, start seeing the Mediterranean with such a loving gaze? A

⁷ See, for example, Paula Findlen, Wendy Wassyng Roworth, and Catherine M. Sama, eds., *Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour*, ed. Paula Findlen, Wendy Wassyng Roworth, and Catherine M. Sama (Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁸ Fusaro, Maria, Colin Heywood, and Mohamed Salah Omri. 2010. *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*. Tauris Academic Studies, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.634

⁹ Hester Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey Through France, Italy, and Germany* (A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1789), 2:59.

¹⁰ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 1:17.