

Mobility and Immobility in the Early Modern Mediterranean

Junko Thérèse Takeda

Syracuse University

In Part 1, Chapter 5 of *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*, Fernand Braudel described the sea as “everything it is said to be: it provides unity, transport, the means of exchange and intercourse [...] But it has also been the great divider, the obstacle that had to be overcome.” Essentially, the unity of the Mediterranean depended on the ability for people to move about it. “The different regions,” Braudel continued, “are connected not by the water, but by the peoples of the sea [...] The Mediterranean has no unity but that created by the movements of men.” Braudel recognized that despite the “land and sea routes” that crisscrossed the Mediterranean, an inherent tension existed therein, between mobility and immobility.¹

In the following short essay, I’d like to reflect on this tension. I will discuss how my colleagues and I, who approach the Mediterranean from the vantage point of early modern French history, have interwoven considerations of mobility and immobility in our studies without assuming their incompatibility. Then, I will conclude by sharing an example of an individual I have been writing about in my recent microhistory projects, an Armenian prisoner of the French state, Avetik Yevtogliatsi, whose life epitomized this complex dynamic.

As some of the graduate students’ workshoped papers—particularly those on captivity, enslavement, displacement, and exile—beautifully demonstrated at our symposium, scholars are increasingly highlighting how asymmetries of power and capabilities for violence, in addition to accidents of geography and environment, conditioned the movements of peoples and the circulation of materials, information, and ideas. The coexistence of voluntary and involuntary migration and people’s simultaneous experiences with mobility and immobility were the central topics in a recent volume published in 2023, *Twelve Cities—One Sea*, to which I had the honor

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73 [1949]), 1:276.

of contributing.² The result of a collaborative humanities project, "People in Motion: Entangled Histories of Displacement Across the Mediterranean," the essayists of *Twelve Cities* explored how the development of trans-Mediterranean commercial, diplomatic, and trade networks intersected with the histories of "human dislocation," "isolation," and "discrimination."³ In my own contribution, "Marseille—Between Independence and Incarceration," I described how southern France's foremost Mediterranean free port for global trade served as a regional industrial center, a prison town, and a naval yard, as a city that celebrated its physically and socially mobile merchants and historic trans-Mediterranean connections while thriving off the enslavement, incarceration, and immobilization of Protestants, Muslims, Orthodox Christians, "women of ill-repute," and other minoritized and marginalized populations under lock and key.⁴

The focus on "entanglements" to complicate the story of early modern mobility with an eye on displacement, dislocation, or immovability is not unique to the *Twelve Cities* volume. Early modern French historians have increasingly focused on topics ranging from empire, diplomacy, diasporic and multiethnic populations, and various forms of unfreedom to highlight how statist expansion materialized through policies that sought to regulate the entanglements of Christians, Muslims, and various racialized and religious minorities on French shores. Marseille has loomed large in many of these studies.

These contributions are welcome among early modern Mediterraneanists, who have occupied a small corner in French scholarship, where much of the studies related to the sea, for reasons having to do with the conquest of Algeria (1830), have focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As my colleagues Ian Collier and Gillian Weiss have described in the *Journal of French Historical Studies* forum on "Framing Muslims in the Making of France," "Key sites of memory [...] such as Marseille, the Mediterranean, the *bagne* (here, meaning colonial prison), slavery and abolition, find themselves shorn of the longer history to which they belong."⁵

But this is changing with a rise in interest in the migrants, merchants, prisoners, and slaves who seasonally or perennially made Marseille a base. Sebouh Aslanian and Olivier Raveux, for example, have taught us about the migratory paths of diasporic Armenians and shown how forced mobility laid the foundations for later voluntary movements across the Mediterranean to cities including Marseille.⁶ Arazoo Ferozan's recent dissertation, "The Port City of Marseille: Cross-Cultural Encounters and Mercantile Networks in the Early Modern Mediterranean," reveals how long-term relations fostered between the city's Sephardic colony and non-Jewish consuls, ship-captains, and notaries allowed for the continued transport of goods around the sea. But the vitality of these networks did not imply a connected sea; piracy, commercial competition, and political contests between crown and municipality contributed to anti-Semitic waves that threatened the Jews of Marseille with forced removal. And Gillian Weiss's and Meredith Martin's *Sun King at Sea* studies Muslims chained on Louis XIV's galleys built at Marseille's Arsenal. These

² Giovanni Tarantino and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa, eds., *Twelve Cities—One Sea: Early Modern Mediterranean Port Cities and Their Inhabitants* (Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2023).

³ Tarantino and Wyss-Giacosa, *Twelve Cities*, 12.

⁴ Junko Takeda, "Marseille: Between Independence and Incarceration," in Tarantino and Wyss-Giacosa, *Twelve Cities*, 19–35.

⁵ Ian Collier and Gillian Weiss, "Introduction: Framing Muslims in the Making of France, 1300–1800," *French Historical Studies* 47, no. 4 (2024): 521–22.

⁶ Sebouh Aslanian, *Early Modernity and Mobility: Port Cities and Printers across the Armenian Diaspora, 1512–1800* (Yale University Press, 2023).

turcs at the oar who provided labor to sustain French commercial and naval power while forced to participate in Louis's performance of prestige and imperial might embodied the simultaneous experience of immobility and mobility across the sea.

The focus on the social in these and other studies has allowed French historians to center their works on individuals who were not just "othered" subjects of French gazes, but actors who operated in a racialized Mediterranean world. Guillaume Calafat, Wolfgang Kaiser, Brian Sandberg and others have focused on corsairs, captives, and the intensified contacts between Jews, Muslims, eastern Mediterranean, and North African populations and the ways in which premodern concepts of race evolved across these encounters. What lies on the horizon are more studies that can show the interplay between the French Mediterranean and the Caribbean, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean worlds. In this regard, global microhistories of the kind modeled by the late Natalie Zemon Davis's *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds*, or more recently, by Sue Peabody in *Madeleine's Children: Family, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies*, can provide some inspiration for French Mediterraneanists hoping to globalize their analyses on race, ethnicity, and the complexities of long-distance seaborne mobility.⁷

This leads me to conclude with a few words about my current micro-historical project on Avétik, an Orthodox Armenian patriarch of Istanbul, and his servant Katchadur.⁸ Both men were kidnapped, transported across the Mediterranean, and imprisoned by the French Crown amid the rising tide of anti-Orthodox sentiment following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). A study of these two unfortunate Armenians plucked out of the Ottoman Empire and incarcerated thousands of miles away highlights how trans-Mediterranean and trans-Atlantic regions were becoming connected, not only by the movements of sea- and ocean-going ships and the official correspondence, voluntary travelers, and merchandise and cargo they carried, but also through their transportation of "enemies of the French nation" and "libertines" seen as threats to the French social order.⁹ These prisoners' seaborne movement forced their separation from their home communities and from French society. Mobility, in other words, imposed upon them social death and social isolation in the form of imprisonment or permanent exile in the colonies. Seas of connections were also seas of disconnections. Immobilized individuals still existed within a world in motion.

Avétik's kidnapping was ordered by the French ambassador to the Ottoman Port, Charles de Ferriol, and Louis XIV's secretary of state, the comte de Pontchartrain. They calculated that

⁷ On racialized French Mediterranean worlds, see, for example, Patricia Lorcin and Todd Shepard, eds., *French Mediterraneans: Transnational and Imperial Histories* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Guillaume Calafat and Matthieu Grenet, *Méditerranées: une histoire des mobilités humaines, 1492-1750* (Points: 2023); Calafat and Wolfgang Kaiser, "The Economy of Ransoming in the Early Modern Mediterranean," in eds. Francesca Trivellato, Leor Halevi, Catia Antunes, *Religion and Trade: Cross-Cultural Exchanges in World History, 1000-1900* (Oxford University Press, 2024): 108-130; Brian Sandberg, "'Moors Must Not Be Taken For Black': Race, Conflict, and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern French Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Studies* 29, no. 2 (2021): 182-212; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim Between Worlds* (Hill and Wang, 2006); Sue Peabody, *Madeleine's Children: Families, Freedom, Secrets, and Lies in France's Indian Ocean Colonies* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁸ Junko Takeda, "Catholics Abandoned by Louis XIV: A Georgian Prince, an Armenian Patriarch, and Religious Politics in Islamic Asia," *French Historical Studies* 47, no. 4 (2024): 571-90.

⁹ Jennifer J. Davis, *Bad Subjects: Libertine Lives in the French Atlantic, 1619-1814* (University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

removing from Constantinople the patriarch, who politically benefited from the patronage of the sheik al islam Feyzullah Efendi, would strengthen French Catholics' position around the Ottoman capital at a time when the financial power and political connections of Greek and Armenian Orthodox communities frustrated Jesuit and Capuchin proselytization among eastern Catholics.

I was drawn to Avétik when I came across two sets of documents related to his kidnapping and subsequent incarceration: (1) Ferriol and Pontchartrain's archived letters about the "Avétik affair" and (2) a memoir written by Avétik while detained at the Bastille. In his narrative, Avétik wrote about his multiple detentions: around the Mediterranean, in a Spanish prison in Messina, and at Marseille's Chateau d'If and Arsenal of the Galleys; in Normandy at the Abbaye du Mont-Saint-Michel; and in Paris at the Bastille. Less than a year after he wrote his memoir, following his release from prison in exchange for renouncing the Orthodox faith, he mysteriously died, likely poisoned under Pontchartrain's orders. The secretary of state then detained Avétik's servant, Katchadur, who had sailed to Marseille in search of his master, and ordered him transported to Guadeloupe as a prisoner for life.

The tragic story of these two Armenian prisoners shows how considerations of Mediterranean mobility and immobility can be connected to histories of trans-Atlantic bondage and enslavement and to studies of the multiplication of imperial carceral spaces. But perhaps more importantly, the story of the vulnerabilities of two ethnic and religious minorities from an Islamic empire holds lessons relevant to the darkening world of the present day. Armenians numbered among many in the early modern world who experienced the ravages of wars fought by larger imperial neighbors: mass deportation, displacement, and dispossession. The broad historic trajectories that landed Armenians like Avétik in Istanbul from central Anatolia and the political accidents that delivered Avétik into French hands resonates in our own time, as the lives of millions of undocumented, visa-insecure, and stateless populations—largely of color—hang in the balance between forced mobilities and immobilities, both near and far from the Mediterranean. A