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Cultural Routes between East and West: a network for cooperation between Mediterranean cities

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Abstract

Regions bordering the Mediterranean Sea form an area where more than geographical proximity strong cultural links are found, an area that, despite the specificities of individual countries, has important features of community life, which enable a convenient strategic opportunity for a large-scale policy. In this context, cultural heritage may play a role of social and territorial cohesion, thus representing a key factor for the sustainable development of communities and regions. The paper examines the meaning and the essence of Cultural Routes, focusing on the strategy for their conservation and enhancement in relation to their specific characteristics and peculiarities. Criteria for their fruition and management are also evaluated.

The challenge is to enrich and develop knowledge of Cultural Routes between East and West and to create a cooperation network among Mediterranean cities for the integrated conservation of the cultural and environmental heritage they share.

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1. Mediterranean: sea, earth, civilizations, cultures

The Mediterranean basin is studded with places that have produced, ever since the first human settlements, the most surprising historic and cultural events, the fruit of a millennial and great past in which geography often made history.

The recent essay on the Mediterranean, a masterpiece of archaeological historical and geographic research, by Cyprian Broodbank (2015), is the best contribution to the history of ‘Mare nostrum’ in the last sixty years, since the impressive work in two volumes by Fernand Braudel was published (1953). The results of the extensive research on the ‘Civilizations of the Empires of the Mediterranean’ can be appreciated in the latter work, which the author described and depicted in a later study (1987), with the collaboration of other academics of various disciplines, creating a great fresco of spaces, history, men and traditions. The work of Braudel has deeply innovated our vision of life in Europe and the Mediterranean in the Fifteen hundreds, having opposed to the traditional model of the crisis, occurred as a result of the new Atlantic navigation courses, the vision of a world still very much crossed by trade and contrasts, tension and exchanges, in which not only the countries of the coast, but also distant States were directly or indirectly involved. Throughout the entire 16th century the vitality of the Mediterranean area still appeared to be extraordinarily dynamic and essential to the civilizations of the Old World. The author carried out the study of this historical period as a connection between three distinct moments: history gradually unfolding with slow transformations, taking place over centuries or even millennia, history at the rhythm of shorter cycles, in decades, and finally history showing, through such investigation, its effectiveness and value as an instrument, calibrated to the dimension of the individual, for the analysis of the great ages of the past.

But it is Alessandro Vanoli, historian of the Middle Ages, who recounts the story of four ‘voyages’ along the coasts of this ancient sea, a real emotional journey, in and out of history, moving from antique episodes up to the contemporary age. The author reminds us that this sea touches three continents, and an incredible number of peoples, languages and civilizations, and he has us experience, with great richness of references, fascinating itineraries, from the Middle East in perpetual unrest, to the Iberian coasts, from the south of Gaul to the shores of Africa, through a sweeping view over the history of the Mediterranean and another vision of its troubled current times and “A world made of exchanges and commerce, wars and conflicts, a babel of languages and great civilizations, religions and fanaticisms”. (Vanoli, 2015, p.7)

The Mediterranean has therefore represented a common matrix, an idea and hope to draw strength from, for the peoples and races that have continued to mix in it for centuries, merging or clashing, driven to action by its climate and even by its geology.

“The Mediterranean has now become a frightening word for us, controversial and cause for indignation. Its millennial history is of little consequence: what does matter are the desperate people who drown every day, the economic crisis that has been blowing through it like a storm, the madmen and murderers wetting its coast with blood”. (Vanoli, 2015, p.8)

But we still need that very Mediterranean together with the myths and hopes it holds.

2. Cultural Routes: meaning, conservation and enhancement

Cultural Routes often reveal the encounter of The East and West, enhancing the contributions of peoples and passing on to younger generations such values as solidarity, freedom, sharing, peace multicultural integration and tolerance. They also represent the irreplaceable narrative keys to establish a relation between man and cultural and natural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

The International universe of organisations for the conservation of cultural heritage (UNESCO, ICOMOS and Council of Europe) has not yet reached a unanimous agreement over the meaning and essence of Cultural Routes, disorienting at times the process of perfecting appropriate legislative strategies and the coordination between the institutions responsible for their popularisation, enhancement and implementation.

The Council of Europe maintains that they should unfold around a theme (Resolution CM/Res, 2007) and that they are representative of the memory, history and heritage of Europe. This approach implies they are not meaningful because of their intrinsic value but because they constitute the connection of cultural and touristic

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