Part One

'Frogs round a Pond': Ideas of the Mediterranean

We inhabit a small portion of the earth . . . living round the sea like ants and frogs round a pond.

Socrates, in Plato, *Phaedo*, 109B

Most of all it is the sea that delineates precisely the layout of the land, creating gulfs, sea-basins, traversable narrows and, in the same way, isthmuses, peninsulas and capes; in this the rivers and mountains also play their part.

Strabo, *Geography*, 2.5.17

When God created the Mediterranean he addressed it, saying, 'I have created thee and shall send thee my servants. When these will ask for some favour of me, they will say "Glory to God!" and "God is Holy!" and "God is Great!" and "There is no God but God!" How wilt thou then treat these?' 'Well, Lord', replied the Mediterranean – 'I shall drown them.' 'Away with thee – I curse thee – I shall impoverish thy appearance and render thee less fishy!'

Al-Muqaddasi, *The Best Arrangement for the Understanding of the Lands*, 37, trans. Miquel (1963) 43

The continuum is magnificent. The peoples around the Mediterranean and over to the Gulf of Persia are really one animate being.

Jakob Burckhardt (1959) *Judgements on History and Historians*, 23

Today in 1972, six years after the second French edition, I think I can say that two major truths have remained unchallenged. The first is the unity and coherence of the Mediterranean region. I retain the firm conviction that the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, that the whole sea shared a common destiny . . . And the second is the greatness of the Mediterranean, which lasted well after the age of Columbus and Vasco da Gama.

Fernand Braudel (1972a) Preface to English translation, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 14

Chapter I
A Geographical Expression

The subject of this work is the human history of the Mediterranean Sea and its coastlands over some three millennia. Its immediate contention is that this history can profitably be treated as material for a unified and distinct discipline. Its purpose is to discover, first, how far the region so treated has displayed over this long period any unity and distinctiveness of its own, and second, what kinds of continuity could have been involved: these two questions form the backbone of our work.

In the Introduction we have drawn a distinction that embraces both senses of the word history – the past and the historian's record of it. There is history *in* the Mediterranean, and there is (or can be) history *of* the Mediterranean. The first need not comprise a large area, time-span, or topic, and is related only contingently or indirectly to its geographical setting. By contrast, history *of* the region presupposes an understanding of the whole environment. And the environment in question is the product of a complex interaction of human and physical factors, not simply a material backdrop or a set of immutable constraints. It is this history *of* the Mediterranean that concerns us.

The ambitious chronological scale on which we therefore operate is hard to delimit exactly. The Introduction, again, indicates in general terms how we have come to conceive our period. But the extent of the enquiry must vary from topic to topic and respond to various characteristics of the appropriate evidence. Instead of relating our coverage to established chronological categories, however, we prefer to see our chosen time-span whole. This time-span cannot, at least for our purposes, adequately be described in terms of different ages – prehistoric, classical, early medieval, and so on – with clear divisions between them. Thus, if we consider material remains, the basis of archaeology, our main period is the Iron Age – that is, from the weakening of the predominance of bronze technologies to the arrival of widespread alternatives to metal in our own century (cf. Chapter IX). If, by contrast, we think in terms of the history of political culture, our range extends from the polity formation of the second millennium B.C. to the origins of nation-states in the later Middle Ages and their subsequent superimposition on the political geography of the Mediterranean. If, more specifically, we look to the history of colonies (VII.6), then attention could range from the Hyksos and the neo-Assyrians to nineteenth-century British and French Mediterranean involvement. If, again, we take the Homeric poems and the records of

the Mycenaean and Phoenician worlds as precursors, then the phenomenon of the text, in the broadest sense, defines the beginning of the enterprise; and, in the same terms, our investigation may be said to end with the enormous increase in the production of bureaucratic documents in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, and the contemporary ideological creation of a 'Romantic Mediterranean' (cf. II.1). The more recent of these termini mark, in their different ways, a transition to something different in Mediterranean history – a new phase that seems to us so unlike its predecessors that the broad distinction between it and them is not one whose usefulness we propose to question: a phase for which history *of* the region becomes inappropriate and quite different explanatory frameworks need to be devised.

The chronology, inclusive and flexible as it is, may need less justification than the area that we have chosen. What makes the region of the Mediterranean Sea a promising subject for so broadly based an enquiry?

1. What is the Mediterranean?

Obviously no single brief answer can be given to that question; in a sense, the whole of this book is a response to it. But we can, at this preliminary stage, introduce two essential topics to which we shall have to return frequently, though not in the form in which we set them out here. The first of them is the long history of how the Mediterranean Sea has been envisaged, beginning with the earliest traceable origins of the notion that its waters constitute a single entity. The second, which we would not separate too sharply from the first but instead interpret as its modern sequel, is the 'scientific' definition of the Mediterranean's physical geography: the established answer to the question of what makes it a region as well as a sea.

These related topics allow us also to introduce the two principal ways in which Mediterranean unity has been characterized: by reference either to ease of communications, which we may conveniently label the *interactionist* approach, or to common physical features, the *ecologizing* approach. An interactionist theory is likely to emphasize the sea; an ecologizing one is likely to offer generalized description of Mediterranean hinterlands. The two approaches are, of course, by no means mutually exclusive, and indeed Parts Two and Three below will set out our own particular way of combining them, under the signs of the *microecology* and *connectivity*.

First, then, perceptions of the sea. We should not take its unity as an uncontroversial geographical datum. Before the development of satellites, the Mediterranean as a whole was invisible: its component waters were each more naturally experienced as independent. Thus, although the Mediterranean has been a geographical expression for many centuries, the expression originates at a learned, somewhat abstract, level. By the beginning of the first millennium B.C., in the Semitic languages of the Levant, the term 'Great Sea' is quite widely diffused, and it is probably from this tradition that it reached the Greeks. Not surprisingly, it is in the fragments of the pioneer of geography, the philosopher Hecataeus of Miletus, that the phrase is first attested in Greek, around 500 B.C. – in a milieu closely linked to the cultures of the eastern Mediterranean. A Greek

comic poet called Ephippus mocks the obscurity and pretension of such abstract thinking in a scene of a fourth-century Athenian play; here the coast-dwellers of the Mediterranean help the monster Geryon to make use of the whole sea as a great cauldron for boiling a fish the size of the island of Crete (Athenaeus, *The Philosophers at the Dinner Table*, 8.346–7). In the ancient geographical tradition the sea shapes the land, not the other way about – a fundamental notion made explicit in the passage from the Augustan geographer Strabo that serves as an epigraph above.

This logical priority of the sea was not, however, solely the creation of abstract thought. It resulted principally from the centrality of the sea to communications. Despite the obvious dangers, sea transport so far surpassed land communications in ease as to make of the Mediterranean a milieu of interlocking routes onto which the coastlands and harbours faced. In a continuum of experience through which the thought of the Levantine and Greek worlds mingled, the practice of navigation brought into existence another representation of the unity of these waters – an alternative geography, less imaginative and more pragmatic than that of the philosophers. A specialized terminology of land- (or sea-) forms was elaborated, a Mediterranean topographical expertise that has displayed striking continuity over the centuries. The circumstances of navigation are, for instance, closely registered in the early development of that influential expression of geographical coherence, the coastwise voyage or *periplous*: the space of the sea is conceived as a linear route defined by a sequence of harbours or natural features. The Mediterranean came indeed to be regarded as like a great river. And so it appears on a late Roman map, the Peutinger Table, where the sea is grossly elongated. Gulf, river and sea are imaged as varying extensions of the same medium, not conceptually divided as they are in modern geomorphology.

Most importantly, the requirements of navigation generated the sophisticated direction-finding art based on segmenting the discernible horizon according to the names of prevailing winds. In the creation in archaic and classical Greece of such a systematic practice – a wind-rose – we can again begin to see something of the cognitive response to the business of navigation, the building up of a framework of reference akin to that found in other seafaring societies. The abstraction found in Hecataeus and his successor Herodotus, who had a clear idea of the place occupied by the Great Sea in the whole pattern of the cosmos, was only one end of a spectrum of approaches to the problem of understanding so large a body of water and how to sail across it.

It was natural, however, to elaborate at the same time much more relativistic concepts of the Mediterranean. The sea was local to many ancient cultures, and the two most vocal of these called it their own. From the time of Plato and Aristotle, the Greeks referred to the Mediterranean as the 'Sea over by Us'; the Romans more simply came to regard it as *Mare Nostrum*, 'Our Sea'. 'We' of course has many different meanings. The divisions of the Mediterranean reflected in the relativism of the fourth-century B.C. Greek phrase, like some of their modern successors discussed in Section 2 below, serve to make statements about the comparative importance of different parts of the world. Certainly it is possible to trace a whole complex of ideas from Homer to the Hellenistic age that conceptualize the Western Mediterranean as a kind of Near and Far West; and indeed this all-too-familiar enshrining of geographical relativism in official designations is an onomastic trait that originates in Antiquity.

Roman self-centredness was rather more aggressive. The claim of the Romans to 'their' sea was part of a political and cultural process by which they progressively defined the place of Rome at the heart of an Inhabited World – an *Oecumene* or *Orbis Terrarum* with the Mediterranean at its centre. This ever larger claim in the end weakened the relativism of earlier attitudes, and it was during the Roman Empire that the term 'Mediterranean Sea' itself emerged – first explicitly used, in surviving texts, as late as the sixth century of our era in the encyclopaedic writings of Isidore of Seville (*Etymologies*, 12.16.1).

This clear notion of the Mediterranean, part of the 'scientific' world-view of the time, is the one that persists in the learned traditions of the medieval European *Mappae Mundi* and of the Arab geographical writings, from one of which we have taken an epigraph. The Arab tradition portrayed the sea as poor, alien and uninviting, but by and large as a unity – a single sea, full of islands, whose integrity was maintained by its geographers despite obvious pressures to divide it conceptually between Islam and the rest of the world. 'Nos auteurs considèrent la Méditerranée comme une ensemble, et comme un sous-ensemble les îles de cette mer, qu'elles soient d'est ou d'ouest' (Miquel 1967–88, 2.377).

The alternative geographical system – the sum of the concepts of practical navigation – is quite distinct after Antiquity from the geographers' grander vision; it forms the background of the coast-wise orientations of the Arab geographers or the wind-rose-based portolans of the central Middle Ages. As one excellent account has put it, these remarkable charts constitute 'a living vehicle of Mediterranean self-knowledge' (T. Campbell 1987, 373). It was not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the methods and ideas of the Atlantic world and its 'voyages of discovery' were turned in on the Mediterranean, that the two geographies – the abstract and the pragmatic – were welded together again. Even then, the older type of thought, deriving from navigation, survived in some of the less accessible parts of the Mediterranean basin. The distribution of traditional practice – whether in ship-design, rigging, or terminology – reflected distinctive social groupings around islands, gulfs or straits, and continued to do so until a 'levelling' was effected by comprehensive changes such as the advent of fossil fuels. Introducing the second edition of his text of Thucydides, Thomas Arnold of Rugby appositely wrote: 'it will be strange if the establishment of steam-vessels on the Mediterranean does not within the next ten years do more for the geography of Thucydides than has ever been done yet, for it will enable those who are at once scholars and geographers to visit the places of which he speaks personally' (1840, iii–iv).

The Mediterranean has been a geographical expression in yet a further, more modern, sense. It brings us to the second of the two established ways of answering the question 'what is the Mediterranean?', and substitutes a mainly ecologizing approach for the interactionism implicit in much ancient thought.

There is, so the argument goes, a set of common features in the physical geography of Mediterranean lands. Since the development of systematic human geography in the nineteenth century (its origins associated with the names of Carl Ritter and Friedrich Ratzel and its Mediterranean application with that of Alfred Philippson), these common features have made it tempting to discuss the lands as an ensemble (cf. VIII.1). The Mediterranean climate, of hot dry summers and mild rainy winters, is the most famous such feature; but the climatic

effect of the sea, the recurring structural and petrological patterns of the coastlands, or the distinctive natural vegetation that reflects soil as well as climate, can all be advanced to complement it. Thus the natural distribution of the olive or certain isohyets have often been used to delineate the boundaries of the Mediterranean (Map 1). Physical peculiarities of this kind have been taken as diagnostic of something harder to summarize: an habitual, though certainly not inevitable, relationship of man to environment, in the extraction of either subsistence or surplus from the land; a set of seasonal variations, affecting movement across and around the sea. From this angle – of a history 'close to the soil' – it becomes possible to envisage what Fernand Braudel was thinking of when he wrote that, in the heyday of Ottoman power, the Turkish Mediterranean 'lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian' (1972a, 14).

This will not be our approach, though. Rather than treat physical characteristics one by one at greater length, or tease out common rhythms of history, we shall emphasize pronounced local irregularity: the minutely subdivided topography, for instance, which fractions the sweep of a mountain range or river basin, and the effects of interannual variation in temperature and rainfall, which make next to useless the average annual figures for any small topographical unit (Table 1). A definition of the Mediterranean in terms of the unpredictable, the variable and, above all, the local will indeed be explored throughout this book. It is in that context, we propose, that Plato's simile of the pond, with its connotations of habitat or ecological niche, offers such an appropriate image (VIII.5).

The descriptions and conclusions of modern physical geographers, on which any such analysis must to some extent depend, can no more be taken as uncontroversial data than are the concepts of ancient navigators. Both ancient and modern perceptions should, in the first instance, be seen as belonging equally to the history of ideas; before we test their applicability, that is, we should interrogate their sources. The chief among these sources are the province of the next chapter. Here, though, we must address the perhaps disturbing fact that, outside the long and various traditions of geographical thought which we have begun to introduce, the Mediterranean has not obviously suggested itself as a

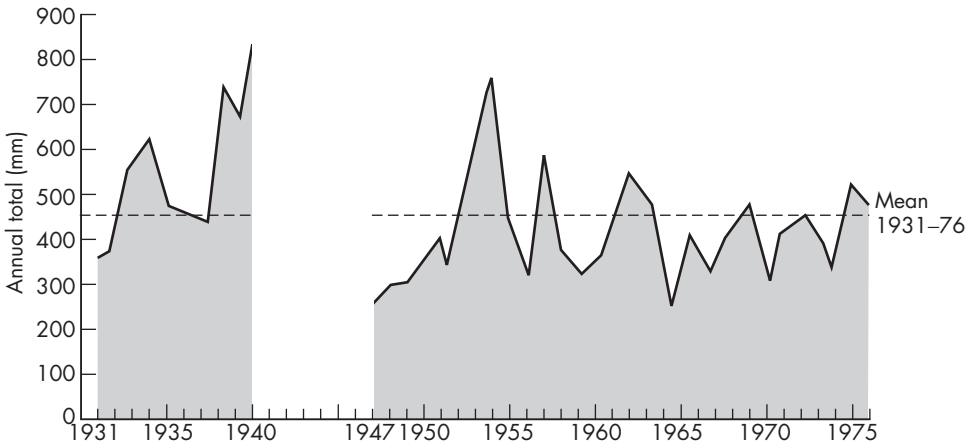

Table 1 Interannual variability of rainfall

Map 1 Physical definitions of the Mediterranean region

single area of investigation. Only archaeologists of the Bronze Age and historians or archaeologists of Greece and Rome customarily treat the area as a whole; and their respective disciplines have suffered by being insulated both from each other and from the study of later periods. The sea, its islands, and the countries that surround it, communicate across it, and share its climate, still seem to many historians to be far less worth studying as a collectivity than is Europe or the Middle East, Christendom or Islam. These, not the Mediterranean, form the major units of enquiry and determine the characteristic orientation of more specialized research – with damaging consequences for intra-Mediterranean comparisons. For all the frequency with which it is referred to (or simply invoked on title pages), Mediterranean history is a division of the subject of history as a whole that has yet to achieve full articulacy and recognition.

When Mediterranean history is undertaken, moreover, it is often narrowly conceived – as history in rather than of the region, piecemeal or abstracted from its locale; as a southerly emphasis within the usual limits of European history; or as fundamentally *inter*disciplinary in character, an admirable yet still slightly awkward straddling of some seemingly obtrusive boundary. There remains only one significant exception to that generalization, now far from recent, Fernand Braudel's classic account of the Mediterranean region in the age of Philip II, the first edition of which appeared in 1949. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World* is irradiated throughout by its author's conviction of the essential unity of his subject, whatever the divisive claims of other historians of the sixteenth century, and nothing that Braudel subsequently wrote about the region (e.g. 1977a; or his unpublished monograph) surpassed that early *chef d'oeuvre* in subtlety and conviction.

Braudel's method is not, however, to be followed uncritically (Chapter II). Nor does his rare achievement single-handedly justify the adoption by other historians of a Mediterranean perspective. The unity that we have outlined – a unity ultimately deriving from very ancient geographical ideas – remains precarious. Any further exploration of perceptions of the Mediterranean past must next address the two historical traditions that implicitly deny the value – even the possibility – of a genuinely pan-Mediterranean approach. We confront those traditions with two simple questions. Why 'European' history? Why that of 'the Middle East'?

2. Collectivities and Subdivisions I: The Challenge of the Continents

'Anyone who speaks of Europe is wrong – it is nothing but a geographical expression.' Bismarck's assertion (an adaptation of Metternich's description of Italy) scribbled on the back of a telegram in 1876 is that designations such as 'Europe' are empty and arbitrary. Historians have frequently quoted Bismarck's dictum. Moreover they have, increasingly, endorsed it. After all, since the Germanic migrations which brought about the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the map of Europe has always been complex in the extreme. Only twice has a substantial part of it been politically unified – by Charlemagne in the eighth century and Charles V in the sixteenth – and even then the unity derived from the person of the ruler rather than from any single governmental structure.

The Bismarckian dismissal of Europe does not seem likely to embody much respect for the Mediterranean unity that we have begun to outline, for that too must seem a mere geographical expression. Yet Bismarck's scorn can at least be redirected – against a persistent opinion that is even more damaging to the notion of a unitary Mediterranean. Bismarck was criticizing those who, in accordance with a notion of the continents that predates Herodotus, have been inclined to believe in a transcendent European identity, such as would make nonsense of the idea of Mediterranean history. Students of the European past have preserved the integrity of their subject, in the face of the almost unremitting complexity of the political map, by emphasizing the overarching cultural unity of Europe, exemplified historically in the idea of Christendom.

From the end of classical Antiquity, on this single continent, there have after all been peoples mostly of the same religion and sharing a culture and a notion of law more or less indebted to that of Rome; their languages have, with a few obvious exceptions, belonged to a single family; they have been fundamentally quite similar for most of their history in economy, technology, and social and political structures; and all this because they have been perpetually in close contact with one another, if not always peaceably. They have thus (it is argued) formed an area within which comparisons are particularly illuminating and about which generalizations are both possible and desirable. The local variations which might threaten to defeat such generalizing can even be transformed into a virtue. According to a tradition in European thought that may have roots deep in the Middle Ages, that was developed by the Romantics, and that perhaps finds a modern exemplar in scholarly discussion of 'the European miracle', the very diversity of Europe is a sign of its collective superiority, its extraordinary inventive genius.

None the less, Bismarck is not readily gainsaid. There are serious weaknesses in all attempts at defining European integrity. The chief of them is to take the cultural delimitation as relatively uncontroversial: the continent's peculiarities are often held to be quite readily detectable through a simple survey of the historical landscape. The extent to which the idea of Europe has a history of its own – often convoluted, nearly always politically charged, highly various in the supporting 'facts' adduced – is, for the most part, conveniently ignored. Yet this history – the changing product of imperial and papal ideologues, of predators, crusaders, conquerors from Charlemagne to Napoleon, of federalist visionaries from (say) Voltaire to Delors – shows just how flimsy are all claims to objective definition. Another weakness, arising from the first, is that the European entity as most often construed fails to embrace the whole continent. Europe has never been an unambiguously bounded geographical expression, and its modern historiographies reflect the fact. Between the age of the Vikings and that of Gustavus Adolphus the Scandinavian world was perhaps of relatively little consequence for other European states. Synoptic histories of Europe can almost be forgiven for dealing with it only briefly and circumspectly. A further and more reprehensible narrowing of focus is represented by the long-established, but now more than ever obsolete, tendency to treat eastern European history as a world apart, essentially peripheral. This is more than a matter of being hesitant about whether or not Russia should be seen as part of Europe. It often involves virtually ignoring Slavic history altogether. For nineteenth-century writers on history as opposed in method and philosophy as Hegel and Ranke, for twentieth-century ones as

different as Arnold Toynbee and Marc Bloch, European history has meant the history of Roman and Germanic cultures.

> . . . the Romano-Germanic world was itself by no means homogeneous. Differences arising from their different backgrounds had deeply marked the various societies of which it was composed. Yet, however pronounced these differences may have been, how can we fail to recognize, over and above them, the predominant quality of a common civilization – that of the West? If in the following pages [of *Feudal Society*] where the phrase 'Western and Central Europe' might have been expected, we say simply 'Europe', this is not merely to avoid the repetition of cumbersome adjectives. (Bloch 1962, xx)

Yet if historians of Europe may neglect the Balkans they do not neglect Greece, if only because in the established schema of 'European history' it holds an inalienable place as the fountainhead of European culture. If they sometimes emphasize too much the isolation from the rest of Europe of the Iberian peninsula (whether under Christian or under Islamic rule) they could hardly be accused of ignoring Italy. Together with southern France, the three great peninsulas (as Braudel calls them) are seen as an inseparable part of a greater whole extending northwards far beyond anything that might be called Mediterranean. It is not, however, entirely obvious why the Mediterranean south should be regarded as more a part of Europe than the Baltic north or the Slavic east. Intensity of north–south political and economic contacts might be part of a justification. One has only to think of Franco-German involvement in Italy from Carolingian times onward. But have east–west contacts been so much less? In any case, it is clear that historians of Europe would not lightly delegate the writing of 'southern' history to some neighbouring discipline such as 'Mediterranean studies' whose practitioners might also – impartially – embrace North Africa and the rest of the Middle East.

Here, within these areas on the other side of the Mediterranean seemingly so remote from Europe, is the material for a geographical expression of a rather different order, and another collectivity whose links with its neighbours have often been vigorously stressed at the expense of its participation in the Mediterranean world: tracts of precarious habitation in a mosaic of more or less fertile zones between sea and Saharan or Syrian desert stretching from Morocco to Turkey. This geographical expression is the domain of scholarly traditions with which the historiography of Europe has, largely for linguistic reasons, had little genuine contact. They are, though, traditions to which the Mediterranean region sets no agreed limits. Their representatives may focus on Mediterranean coastlands to the general exclusion of the remainder of Africa, largely because the Sahara is so often – though misleadingly – put forward as a resilient cultural and economic frontier. But they may, on the other hand, have as much to do with central Asia and the Arabian peninsula as with the Levant. And this is of course mainly due to the overriding significance of the expansion of Islam for every level of their enquiry, an expansion that has imparted a greater homogeneity – of a kind – to the politically fragmented Middle East than Christianity has ever managed to give to Christian Europe.

Adequate historical definition of this large area extending south and east from the Mediterranean remains hard nevertheless. Identifying it with the area politically unified under Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs or Ottoman sultans requires that

no account be taken of the remainder of Islamic history, both later medieval and twentieth-century, when rather different maps apply. Recourse to the modern geography of Islam yields an area extending to equatorial Africa and Indonesia that, even on the scale adopted in the present work, seems far too large to be considered as a single whole. Nor is 'the Middle East' – the general term most commonly used by historians, geographers and anthropologists – particularly satisfactory. Coined in 1902 by the American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, it derived from the strategic thinking of nineteenth-century Europe, alongside the 'Far' and 'Near Easts', and was usually taken to mean Persia and its surrounding territories. Its gradual extension westwards, and the consequent redundancy of the term 'Near East' by the end of the Second World War, have not made its proper application any clearer. And it is also undoubtedly redolent of 'orientalism', as classically if intemperately denounced by Edward Said (1978) – that European tendency (part of Europe's slow self-definition) to image a wide range of 'exotic' cultures as an undifferentiated single 'other'. Some have therefore sought a neutral alternative (SWANA – south-west Asia and North Africa – for example). Yet it is far from clear what such a substitution would really achieve even if it gained widespread acceptance, or what the scope of any new term should be. There is, perhaps, a 'core area consisting of northern Arabia, Syria and northern Iraq' (Wagstaff 1985, 5) – the Middle Eastern equivalent of the north-western core of Europe – to which Iran and Egypt are natural adjuncts. But the decision on whether Afghanistan and formerly Soviet Asia at one extreme and the Maghreb at the other ought also to be included apparently remains a matter for individual scholarly preference. Meanwhile, the cultural and environmental criteria for inclusion that have been proposed – criteria such as 'semiaridity', 'all-pervasive religiosity', or 'competitive individualism' (Keddi 1973; Patai 1952; Lindholm 1996; Eickelman 1998) – are either too vague or too hard to localize for definition to seem any less arbitrary.

On closer inspection, the characterizations of Europe and the Middle East that have usually been offered come to seem disconcertingly imprecise. Few arguments in favour of the categories seem powerful enough to forbid their dissolution, or at least their temporary abandonment; and this is not least because advocates are seldom clear about quite how the general features proposed contribute to unity 'on the ground', in any given locality. None the less the categories continue to be used. And when they do come up for scrutiny, it is, as we have seen, generally only one aspect that is scrutinized: the eastward extension.

Bismarck, we may feel, did indeed have a point. It will be our task to discover whether, at both the general and the local level, there are more convincing arguments to be advanced in defence of Mediterranean unity than his opponents were able to marshal on behalf of Europe or their congeners on behalf of the Middle East.

3. Collectivities and Subdivisions II: The Mediterranean Disintegrated

'The distinction of North and South is real and intelligible . . . But the difference of East and West is arbitrary and shifts round the globe.' Thus Edward Gibbon, annotating the second (1782) edition of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman*

Empire (1896, xxxvi). Discussion focuses, as we have seen, on longitudinal divisions; the one boundary most commonly accepted is that separating North and South. And this boundary seems to fall somewhere across the Mediterranean. Whatever doubts may arise about the integrity of Europe or the Middle East, it remains inescapable that between the sea's northern and southern shores there has long been a major cultural dissonance. Even when the challenge of the continents has been faced, this additional challenge presents itself.

Its earliest manifestation derives from a strand in ancient geographical thought to which we have not so far referred: the 'cosmological' tradition of reflecting on the earth as a whole and on its place in the universe (as distinct from what should properly be called the 'chorographic' tradition that confines description to particular areas of the globe's surface). The ancient cosmological conception of the latitudinal *klima* (or step) gives us the word climate and lies behind the modern theory of the climatic zone. In Antiquity none of the recognized *klimata* into which the surface of the world was divided could be mapped easily onto the notion of 'Our Sea' (Nicolet 1988, ch. 3). And the same could be said of their medieval successors. In that great thirteenth-century Muslim polymath Ibn Khaldun's division of the world into zones, for instance, the Mediterranean is not identified with the 'Middle Zone': rather, the sea straddles three of them (Rosenthal 1967, 1.128–53).

The geographical divisions imposed by cosmology did not, however, initially undermine the ancient conception, described at the beginning of this chapter, of the Mediterranean as a unified topographical phenomenon. Nor did subsequent refinements of the distinctions between zones pose difficulties for the 'scientific' tradition – the current of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought according to which the Mediterranean could be defined by the common physical characteristics of its coastlands. And yet the notion that the region is latitudinally divided, rather than a unity in itself, seems ultimately to have triumphed among geographers. A tradition whose origins can be discerned in the writings of nineteenth-century human geographers such as Ratzel seems to have petered out in the later twentieth century – during the lifetime of Braudel.

To put it summarily, and in ancient terms, cosmology has finally prevailed over chorography. The distinction of North and South remains what it was for Gibbon: 'real and intelligible'. For neither human nor physical geography, as practised around the turn of the millennium, has much time for the Mediterranean area as a distinctive whole. Until fairly recently, surveys of the region appeared with some regularity. Nowadays, in contrast, the textbooks, the more ambitious synopses of 'the natural regions of the globe', and the newer explorations of cognitive geography have little to say about it. Their typical briefs are either Europe or the Middle East: an old division of labour continues to be observed.

Much the same could be said of the conception of the sea evinced by a number of other disciplines. The social anthropology of its borderlands is intense and lively (cf. Part Five). Ethnographic studies of communities around the Mediterranean proliferate (ethnography 'in', to echo our earlier distinction). Yet comparison both within and across the accepted boundaries of the region – ethnography 'of' – remains rare and controversial. Many anthropologists hold that the region does not really delimit a coherent field of study – that it is, if anything, 'in the first place, a concept of heuristic convenience not a "culture

area" in the sense given this phrase by American cultural anthropology' (Pitt-Rivers 1977, viii). Some indeed, most notably Herzfeld (especially 1987b), have argued that it is not even that (cf. Chapter XII). Rather, according to this view, the Mediterranean is a category foisted upon a variety of distinct cultures by the more advanced industrial (and colonial) powers of Europe. Far from being a convenient geographical designation, the term 'Mediterranean' is, in Herzfeld's view, a none too subtle political weapon: a means of distinguishing 'us' – northern European, advanced, diverse – from 'them' – southern, backward, uniform. (Herzfeld might have adduced the geographer Theobald Fischer's *Mittelmeerbilder* (*Mediterranean Images*) in which the justification for the work is explicitly sought in its potential for enhancing German power: Mediterranean countries are seen as undeveloped, easily able to come to the future aid of their great near neighbour to the north (1913, iv).) Alongside 'orientalism', in other words, can be set the comparable ideology of 'Mediterraneanism'. But North and South within the region actually have little in common beyond their essentially subordinate status. In this account, the challenge for anthropology is to resist the allure of the sea and to devise a politically responsible rationale for the ethnography of Europe (Goddard et al. 1994).

Most political scientists would not, it seems, challenge that judgement. When they concern themselves with 'the Mediterranean', they usually take the term to mean something much narrower in focus or more restricted in character than the region as a whole. Still less do they consider it a unity – largely because of the variety of its political regimes. The Mediterranean remains NATO's southern flank, though its place in global strategy is now unclear. It is certainly not a single 'theatre of strategic military action'. In the new era of international relations that has succeeded the Cold War, attention is rather concentrated on the potential 'flashpoints' of the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, rather than the sea as a whole. The Mediterranean coastlands have of course also been the world's main arena for international terrorism. But overall the region apparently continues to be reducible to numerous 'tension zones' to which no 'common parameter of political and strategic analysis can be applied' (Cremasco 1984, 207).

Something similar might, finally, be said by economists. The Mediterranean can again be characterized in terms of major routes. But these, unlike the 'routes' of pre-modern economic history (cf. Chapter V), are genuinely isolated channels of movement – as with the great gas pipeline connecting Algeria with the Po valley. It is no longer a question of the complex chains of interaction of (mainly) shore-hugging voyagers. Here, then, the Mediterranean is no more than a collection of conduits, a few straight lines on the map. Alternatively, it may be firmly divided into two regions, as by development economists. The relatively newly industrialized – and 'democratized' – nations of southern Europe are taken to constitute a sensible unit of study. North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean constitute other such units. There is, however, little thought given to the possible rewards of transmarine comparison, let alone of treating the Mediterranean as a single unit; and this despite the legacy of colonial ties between North and South, and despite the 'global Mediterranean policy' developed by the European Community in the 1970s, a policy that has led to a network of trade agreements and the like between EC members and other littoral states.

Small encouragement, then, for Mediterranean historiography from the social sciences – those disciplines that have recently done much to alter traditional

modes of historiographical perception. From whatever theoretical vantage point we view the region it apparently remains ineluctably divided. Indeed, within the whole field of current academic thinking and social policy the only context in which the Mediterranean has been treated as a single entity appears to be that of environmental concern. The Mediterranean Action Plan, implemented in 1975 and theoretically involving (among others) all Mediterranean states, had as its goals a wide-ranging protection of the sea against pollution and the promotion of 'environmentally sound development' on its littoral. It is worth noting, however, that the environmental problems in question and their anthropogene sources are exceedingly diverse. The unity that Mediterranean environmentalists have claimed for their subject matter derives far less from peculiarities of the discipline than from some very old clichés of Mediterranean description, such as blue waters and clear skies (on which see Chapter II).

Need all this deter? We have conceded in the Introduction and at the beginning of the present chapter that history *of* the Mediterranean is not the appropriate way of conceptualizing the region in the 'modern' or 'post-modern' periods – however modernity is to be defined. To that extent the reluctance of the disciplines just passed in review to take the region as their frame of reference should neither surprise nor concern us. History, whether 'modern' or 'pre-modern' is – or ought to be – a seamless garment, heuristically divisible in numerous different ways. At one extreme the traditional territories of research could be vastly expanded – through attention to the Atlantic seaborne empires of the western European powers in the later Middle Ages; to the medieval trans-Saharan trade and the penetration of Islam into sub-Saharan Africa; to Rome's contacts with India and China; to Dark Age trade between the Caliphate and Baltic countries via Russia; to the connections between settled Europe and the Asian steppe from the age of the Huns to that of the Mongols. (Something of this order will be attempted with respect to the furthest reaches of the Mediterranean in Volume 2.) At the other extreme we could take advantage of inherent weaknesses in existing conceptions of Europe and the Middle East and wholly redraw the boundaries of investigation to produce units that might at the very least prove refreshing. The Baltic could be taken as a unitary region, with the sea perhaps sustaining a unity in diversity comparable to that of the Mediterranean (cf. Malowist 1972). More to our purpose, southern Europe – Spain, Mediterranean France, Italy and the Balkan peninsula – could also be explicitly 'detached' from the rest of the continent.

The boundary between North and South, the boundary that Gibbon thought real and intelligible, would in this account fall across Europe, not across the Mediterranean. There would thus be no further need to consider southern Europe's littoral as a natural or cultural frontier. Southern Europe might indeed be seen as an enlargement of Auden's Spain (as in the poem 'Spain 1937'), 'nipped off from hot Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe'. (Compare the popular Torinese saying that Garibaldi did not unite Italy, he divided Africa.) The Sahara rather than the sea would then constitute a second latitudinal frontier. Moreover, if we no longer respected the always doubtful integrity of Europe and redrew the line between North and South in this way, we might approach the 'Middle East' with comparable irreverence (XII.7). The boundary between East and West – which was for Gibbon arbitrary and shifting – might be taken as

separating the Mediterranean part of the Arab world from the rest: there would be as much justification for that division as for, say, one which separated Egypt from North Africa or Iran from Soviet Asia.

To take advantage of the vulnerability of existing geographies is not, of course, to establish the validity of our own: we have merely opened up a possibility. Clearly, a good deal of theoretical revision remains to be done.

4. Collectivities and Subdivisions III: Intimations of Unity

An account of 1483 illuminates the supposed North–South boundary, and points towards a more satisfying conception of the Mediterranean. Friar Felix Faber, journeying to the Holy Land from Ulm, comes with his noble companions to the south side of the Alps. He describes the moment of arrival in vivid terms:

> while dinner was being prepared I went across with my lords into the court of the house and looking out said, 'Look, if anyone stood on the summit of that mountain, he would be able to see the Great Sea.' When my lords heard this they said, 'Let us go up and behold the sea which perhaps is destined to be our tomb.' And at once my three masters, two of their retinue and I climbed the mountain, which was a good deal higher than it had looked. Casting our eyes out across the region which lay to southward, we looked from the mountains into the Italian plain, and beyond the plain saw the Mediterranean Sea; at the sight of which my lords, being young and sensitive, were appalled and stood still, contemplating the sea and their future dangers. And in fact I too was struck by some qualms at that sight, for all that I had tasted its bitterness thoroughly [on his previous voyage]. For the view from the mountain did have a sufficiently wild appearance. What was near could be seen clearly and the evening sun displayed all the forward part – but all the rest, whose bounds no one could detect, seemed to be towering clouds, thick, gloomy and darkling in atmosphere and colour . . . (*Voyage to the Holy Land* [*Evagatorium Terrae Sanctae* . . .], 7.75)

The sight of the water constitutes the moment when northern Europe and the mountains are left behind and a new region is approached. The decisive point on Felix Faber's journey towards Venice, and thence across the Mediterranean, is this vision of the new world that he and his companions have entered. It is a world characterized by its communications (terrifying as the prospect of them may be), by its climate, and above all by the spectacle of the sea itself – the same sea that washes the shores of his destination, the Holy Land. This sea does indeed form a barrier between Friar Felix's native world and the world of his pilgrimage. But the barrier is here seen to be a zone of transition defined by its potential communications, and not an abrupt discontinuity.

Felix Faber's perception can be pressed into service as we confront a major difficulty inevitably attendant upon history of the Mediterranean: the region's political past. The most sharply defined boundaries, and the ones that have customarily been taken to fracture any concept of the wholeness of the Mediterranean basin, are in every sense political.

There are several long-standing reasons for this emphasis on politics. The first of them is a perhaps undue respect for the usual lines on the political map. Such respect derives from the ideology of the nation-state and its concern with 'natural frontiers' and ethnic inclusiveness, both of which, if achieved, would

lend its boundaries a far greater significance than that arising from mere political or military force. The second reason underlies the first. It is that the earliest texts on which Mediterranean narrative history depends – Herodotus, Thucydides, and their precursors – are explicitly concerned with the settling of political demarcation disputes through warfare. The delineation of sharp political boundaries is the subject of historical, and hence of general, learned discussion in Mediterranean lands from the archaic Greek period on (cf. Momigliano 1991, ch. 2). The third reason arises from the long history of profound religious division between Christendom and Islam, which has promoted the division between North and South in the realm of scholarship that we have already considered. Polities like Muslim Spain or the Crusader states in the Levant, or the brief Norman foothold in North Africa (Abulafia 1985a), seem anomalous. They represent a crossing of the sharp politico-religious frontier.

In this context the most disturbing feature of the Mediterranean past must be the infrequency with which even a significant part of the sea and its hinterlands have constituted anything remotely like a political entity. The empires whose sphere of control or influence has embraced some Mediterranean shores have nearly all had centres of gravity well beyond the region. That is certainly true of the earliest hegemonies of the Middle East (as we must continue to call it) from the third millennium B.C., most of which (Hittite and Egyptian apart) were centred on, or attracted towards, the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia. It would also apply to the Persian Empire in more than one period of its turbulent history; to the empire of Alexander the Great and to the Hellenistic kingdom of the Seleucid dynasty, which succeeded to the Mesopotamian and Syrian part of Alexander's empire after his death; to the Abbasid caliphate, the Islamic empire centred on Baghdad in the eighth and ninth centuries; and to the empire of the Ottoman Turks from the fourteenth century onwards. The single conspicuous example of the pan-Mediterranean empire is that of Rome.

From the end of the third century B.C. until the fall of her western empire nearly seven centuries later, Rome dominated the Mediterranean region and gradually extended her power well beyond its boundaries – notably to Britain, Gaul and the Danube basin. Yet not even the celebrated *pax Romana* could hope to eradicate the immense diversity of provincial loyalties and cultures. There is indeed a strong sense in which the Roman Empire was not Roman (and, we might add, in which the succeeding Byzantine Empire was not Greek) or at least was only patchily, thinly so. Rome's was an empire in which the precarious unity of Greek and Roman language and culture and an economy of exaction and coinage were totally dependent on communications; and for all the fame of the Roman road, the most basic and the most vital lines of communication lay across the sea.

At this point we may revert to Bismarck's antithesis of the geographical expression and the political reality. In the case of Europe, the geographical expression served to denote an ideal, a formula of unity in diversity that has long been potent in political ideology. The political reality, on the other hand, must clearly be envisaged in more subtle terms than those required for the demarcation of modern states, which have at their disposal cartographic, legal and military facilities of a precision and power unimaginable to earlier epochs. An adequate political map of, say, later medieval Europe – that included all minor authorities and jurisdictions – would present an extremely complex image. And at no point

would its character have been determined simply by the physical environment. There may be cultural, ethnic or linguistic frontiers; but there are no natural ones. There are only those frontiers that have arisen out of the interaction between political centres and their peripheries. Frontiers are created slowly, not given; they are very often better conceived as fluid zones of transition between jurisdictions than as clear-cut lines on landscape or map. And even where they remain geographically fixed for a considerable time, the entities that they separate may be in constant evolution. In this sense frontiers are nearly always far less permanent than they may seem. The political map is therefore, above all, a map of the horizon of communications.

If that can be true of Europe, how much more should it apply to a region such as the Mediterranean. The paradox of the Mediterranean is that the all-too-apparent fragmentation can potentially unite the sea and its coastlands in a way far exceeding anything predicable of a continent. The Mediterranean is, in Trump's apt phrase (1980, 3), 'a peninsula in reverse', but one whose possible cohesion and sense of identity exceed anything normally associated with real peninsulas. The minutely subdivided topography bound by a vastly ramified complex of seaways constitutes a geographical expression. And, huge as it is, this geographical expression can be at least *conceived* as a political entity in the same way as can any of the smaller units whose political domain is defined by their horizon of communications. So the Mediterranean is something that the imperialist would willingly bid for or lay claim to, however hard that claim may be to realize. The Roman Empire of course provides the conspicuously successful example; but Saladin's dream of retaking the Syrian coast and then crossing the sea to carry the Holy War to the 'islands of the Franks' implies comparable aspirations (Cameron Lyons and Jackson 1982, 372–3). So too does the visionary programme urged on the count-kings of Barcelona by Arnald of Vilanova around 1300: conquest of Jerusalem, extirpation of Islam, unification with Byzantium – and the foundation of a universal Christian empire with its capital in Sicily (Fernández-Armesto 1991, 67).

There is therefore some truth to the assertion that the Mediterranean was for many centuries a unity by virtue of being successively a Roman, a Muslim, a Christian and a Turkish lake (cf. Trevor-Roper 1972; A. R. Lewis 1951), even if the actual degree of control exercised by the dominant powers was nearly always uneven or limited (II.2; V.2, 4). But the idea is of more general significance. The Greek historians of the fifth century B.C. had already conceived of the past as a sequence of 'sea-powers' or thalassocracies, with the secret of imperial success residing in control of the connecting medium. The prime example was Athens in the fifth century, binding together many dozens of scattered settlements across the Aegean Archipelago and on the inaccessible coasts of that sea, by virtue of being, as a contemporary put it, 'the Power that rules the Sea' ([Xenophon] *Constitution of the Athenians*). What was ruled was, as we have stressed, a network of communications. But it was also the network along which staples were moved to counteract in part the accidents of glut and dearth that the combination of climate and topography made inevitable (cf. Chapters V, VI, IX). This was, in another prominent ancient tradition, the corrupting sea of our title.

Such control of the movement of resources has always been an essential aspect of Mediterranean power at every period. Prehistorians have interpreted seaborne

redistribution as the crucial element in the formation of early states and civilizations, and even in the development of agriculture. These tempting theories help remind us that the history of naval supremacy in the Mediterranean – a complex interaction of fleets, pirates, mercenary captains and privateers – is not a simple matter of political confrontation. Nothing short of control of the integrating medium across whole tracts of the sea is at stake, and the prize is one that transcends local interests. Seen in this light, then, Rome's success may appear spectacular only in its completeness and duration. Carthaginians, Ptolemies, Caliphs, Byzantine Greeks, Aragonese, Venetians, and various colonial powers of north-western Europe have all attempted to dominate the mechanics of interaction between the multitude of particular places in the coastlands and islands of this sea. The geography of their respective empires of course differed; in means and intentions they were perhaps quite similar.

The states of the modern Mediterranean, all now independent of empire, are as divided from each other as they have ever been. Yet even the twentieth century, during the course of which the Mediterranean has ceased to possess (in our special sense) a history of its own, has seen various examples of pan-Mediterraneanism, when these separate polities bid for at least an ideological prominence in the wider unity of the whole sea. And this wider unity is conceived in terms that derive from the ancient traditions outlined above. Northern powers have advanced the claims of the heirs of classical civilization; those to the south and east have found indigenous precedents for their location of themselves in a Mediterranean-wide frame. Paradoxically, by virtue of their common aspiration, the separatist states have conduced to the perpetuation of an ancient ideal of thalassocracy – and thus to the maintenance of at least a *residual* sense of Mediterranean unity. It is not, therefore, the obvious limitations of the history of nation-states – the arbitrariness of their frontiers with regard to social, economic or geographical phenomena – that enable us to claim the coastlands of the Mediterranean as a political unit at least as intelligible as 'Europe' or the 'Middle East'. Rather than being a problem whose relevance we should contest, the political and ethnic untidiness of the Mediterranean could turn out to be inspiring. Dense fragmentation complemented by a striving towards control of communications may be an apt summary of the Mediterranean past.