

Abdellatif, Rania; Benhima, Yassir; König, Daniel; Ruchaud, Elisabeth (Hrsg.): *Construire la Méditerranée, penser les transferts culturels. Approches historiographiques et perspectives de recherche*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag 2012. ISBN: 978-3-486-70476-1; 193 S.

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This book is the result of a collective research programme that was based at the German Historical Institute in Paris. It examines the question of cultural transfers in the medieval Mediterranean space. In their introduction, the editors propose an examination of the history of the notion of cultural transfer, starting from Arnold Toynbee, Fernand Braudel, Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévy-Strauss and unfolding it until present times. They also propose a typology of such transfers in the time and region under study. Their aim is „to challenge the validity of culturalist schemes opposing monolithic blocks“ that, in their opinion, is still dominant in historiography (p. 14). They also explain how they came to the study of the notion of cultural transfer and of its origins and discuss the relevance of this notion as for their specific field of study and interpretative perspective. For that, they compare its pertinence to the one of several notions that belong to the same sphere, like those of acculturation, *métissage* and translation and try to underline the respective contribution of each of them to the evolution of historiography. This is how they arrive to a review of the main conceptions of the notion of cultural transfers that are to be found in the historiography of our time. This review is mainly based upon a reading of the work of historians like Peter Burke, Michel Espagne, Matthias Middell, Friedrich Prinz, Wolfgang Schmale and Bernd Roeck. This typology is very stimulating, but its limit is that of a difficulty in articulating such theoretical and methodological impulses to the specificities of the area under study. This kind of limit is also that of the book as a whole, as most authors did not really use the opportunity of confronting the Mediterranean as an object of study with a strong history of historiographical construction to the possibilities of interpretative inno-

vation offered by the use of the notion of cultural transfer. Few of them also looked at the other side of this possible relationship: how the study of Mediterranean issues might help refining the concept of cultural transfer itself.

In the first chapter, Jocelyne Dakhli starts from the question of why the Mediterranean has not been, in spite of its evident position as a space of cultural crossings, a fertile receptacle for studies on *métissages*, contrary to the Atlantic and the West Indies for example. She underlines the ambiguous nature of the notion, which might have discouraged scholars working on the region, and uses the example of the *lingua franca*, that she studied, in order to illustrate how a hybrid cultural object is not necessarily a symbol of shared values. This leads her to discuss the force in recent Mediterranean historiography of new visions of the fracture between Christianity and Islam, that left little room for studies on transfers. Such studies focused, she argued, on intermediary groups, but failed to confront to the whole picture. Her proposal to focus on different kinds of cultural objects is thus a way of exiting this unsatisfactory situation. But her use of the *lingua franca*, on the very existence of which discussions are still open and doubts are growing, is not fully convincing.

In the next chapter, Aziz al-Azmeh proposes a reflection on the relationship between early Islam and the Mediterranean. But here again, little is said about how the use of the notion of cultural transfer might contribute to the invention of a new historiographical posture.

Jenny Rahel Oesterle then proposes an analysis of the visions of the Mediterranean world in the new German school of medieval studies. She begins with the history of the German reception of Braudel's work on the Mediterranean, underlying the long inertia of initial doubts. She then presents, citing the work of Stefan Esders and Thomas Ertl, the state of the art of German medieval historical research on the Mediterranean region, focusing on the persistence of academic divides between various forms of area studies (Christian Europe, Islam, the Byzantine and then Ottoman empires) and on the emergence of a new vision of the Mediterranean under the influence of the American and British histo-

rical literature. Among these new historians, for which connectivity is the object of a specific attention, she underlines the importance of the work of Wolfgang Welsch, Michael Borgolte and Wolfram Drews.

In a chapter about medieval thalassocracies, Jan Rüdiger tries to use reflections about the possible content of this notion in the Mediterranean case in order to denounce the persisting echo of what he calls mediterraneist discourses. He promotes a vision of the notion that focuses on a less general meaning and examines its genuine contents, that is those of a power that not only applies on the sea but also depends on it and reflects in its organization the priority of the maritime dimension. Only this configuration, for him, could allow fertile comparisons at the scale of Mediterranean cultural transfers. But unfortunately, the chapter does not really explore this stimulating hypothesis.

In another chapter, Philippe Sénac discusses the question of the frontier in medieval Spain. This field of study has indeed been the object of recent historiographical *aggiornamenti*, which the author presents as examples of innovative uses of the notion of cultural transfer. Citing the work of Eduardo Manzano Moreno, Pascal Buresi, Céline Martin, Klaus Herbers and Nikolas Jaspert as well as his own, he illustrates how our vision of the frontier between Christianity and Islam in the Iberian Peninsula has been profoundly revised. The frontier, the various denominations of which the author studies, is now seen as a site of exchanges and not only of confrontation. These exchanges can be better understood thanks to the recourse to the notion of porosity and included circulations of cultural nature. This new school of Iberian medieval studies has also promoted a new vision of the Islamic character of the Peninsula, that had long been seen under the dominant lens of the *reconquista*. This chapter is one of the most stimulating of the book. In the next one, of a quite comparable nature, Abbès Zouache uses the concept of cultural transfer in order to read differently the history of the crusades. His historiographical essay reports the spreading in the historical profession of a new way of conceiving the crusades in which the focus is more and more on societies under Crusaders

domination in the Orient. This contribution illustrates the spirit of the book, that is sometimes difficult to trace in other chapters: how a new historiographical posture and the use of a concept can induce the emergence of a renewed vision of a subject on which various layers of *clichés* had accumulated. The praise of this chapter is also to include extensively into this discussion of historiographical nature the production in Arabic language as well as to analyze the persisting and ambiguous ideological content of historical research on the Crusades, from Europe to the United States and Israel.

In his contribution on technical transfers in the medieval Mediterranean, Yassir Benhima denounces the persistence of culturalist *topoi* in the present production in the field on the history of sciences and techniques. Insisting on the importance of a new vision of the field promoted by Eliyahu Ashtor, he takes the example of the hydraulic history of al-Andalus in order to illustrate the stakes of the study of technical transfers. The main message of his chapter is on the necessity of a precise historical contextualization of the processes at work, on both sides of the transfer.

The chapter by Pierre Bonte, on the Mediterranean of the anthropologists begins with an evocation of a series of seminal works in Mediterranean anthropology, by figures like Julian Pitt-Rivers, John Peristiany and John Davis. It underlines how notions like kinship, family and religiosity have captured most of the attention, at the expense of the Mediterranean paradigm itself, in the context of a limited institutionalization of the Mediterranean as a cultural area. This is why the author calls for a new season of Mediterranean comparatism. But he does not really propose concrete elements on which this new approach might rely.

The conclusion of the book, by Isabel Schäfer, presents the various institutional frameworks within the European Union pertaining to Mediterranean cooperation, but fails to propose a pertinent discussion relating to the theme of the book. It is the problem of the whole book: presenting a series of divergent historiographical panoramas does not guarantee the invention of a pertinent and innovative discourse on the Mediterranean, on cultural

transfers and on the possible interaction of both objects.

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