The Mediterranean Perspective on Global History and Culture

As scholarly initiatives have increasingly shown, we gain powerful new insights into the major forces of history and their globalization when we examine regions of interaction rather than confine ourselves within the traditional academic framework of the nation or even continent. The deepest and broadest histories of interaction are those that have taken place across oceans, and one of the most important and well recorded of these is the Mediterranean. Yet the interconnected histories of Mediterranean cultures have, in modern times, become eclipsed by division and conflict in the geopolitical sphere, and by disciplinary boundaries within the academy.

The Mediterranean holds particular importance for understanding today’s world. It is home to the longest continuous interactions among Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is the meeting-point of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Its civilizations profoundly contributed to the evolution of knowledge and institutions at the basis of modern Western society, in science, medicine, law, philosophy, mathematics, literature, the arts, and politics. It also contains some of the world’s most precious commodities. The histories of the cultures which comprise the Mediterranean basin are interconnected in multiple ways, and the balance of power there has shifted many times. In our own day, no other region contains so many pressing geopolitical issues.

Study of this region has tended, in the modern academy, to be fragmented, based on national, ethnic, religious, linguistic, or continental interests. Recently, however, scholars have begun to examine the connections and contacts made possible by the sea — through trade, travel, conquest, and the like —, making the Mediterranean an ideal site for studying the porosity of cultures and the intercultural dynamics that national, sectarian, and linguistic histories often obscure. Centered on a body of water which facilitates exchange and, in this way, *unites*, this conception of the Mediterranean represents an alternative model to the divided, and divisive, ones based on religion, ethnicity, nation, language, or continent — a model that allows, instead, for a transnational and cross-cultural perspective on the region’s interconnected histories and cultural achievements. The societies of the Mediterranean bear witness to many core legacies of pluralism over the course of their histories, right up to the present day: in literature, music, art and architecture; in forms of knowledge, notably philosophy, science, and medicine; in social practices, customs and diet; and many more.

We propose to bring to UM a group of junior scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences whose research will refocus attention on the Mediterranean as a dynamic cultural nexus. Taking a networked approach to historical and cultural inquiry, this group will work collaboratively to articulate and implement new ways of thinking about the transnational and transcultural dynamics of historical processes in the region. We will concentrate on key areas of socio-cultural interaction: architecture and urban design (Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning), religion and migration (Frankel Center for Judaic Studies), visual culture (History of Art), and language and literature (Romance Languages and Literatures).