

Mediterranean Historical Review

ISSN: 0951-8967 (Print) 1743-940X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/fmhr20

Jews and the Mediterranean

by Matthias B. Lehmann and Jessica Marglin, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020, vii + 225 pp., US$30 (hardcover), ISBN 9780253047939

Dario Miccoli

To cite this article: Dario Miccoli (2023) Jews and the Mediterranean, Mediterranean Historical Review, 38:1, 133-135, DOI: 10.1080/09518967.2023.2200426

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2023.2200426

Published online: 15 Jun 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 55

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=fmhr20

Mediterranean Historical Review, 2023
Vol. 38, No. 1, 133–152

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEWS

Jews and the Mediterranean, by Matthias B. Lehmann and Jessica Marglin, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2020, vii + 225 pp., US$30 (hardcover), ISBN 9780253047939

The Mediterranean has long been portrayed as a sea of cohabitation and conflict, continuity and rupture, and a space whose history cannot be encapsulated easily within the borders of empires or nation-states. The Mediterranean is also one of the spaces where Jewish history saw some of its moments of greatest glory and tragedy: from the ancient kingdom of Israel and thriving centres of Jewish life such as Hellenistic Alexandria or late Ottoman Salonika, to the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century and the mass migrations of the Jews from the Arab-Muslim world in the 1950s and 1960s. But can Jewish history be a useful angle for looking at the history of the Mediterranean as a whole? And vice versa, to what extent can the Mediterranean contribute to our understanding of broader Jewish historical dynamics across and beyond Europe, North Africa and the Middle East? The volume *Jews and the Mediterranean*, edited by Matthias B. Lehmann and Jessica Marglin, shows that the Mediterranean is indeed an extraordinary point of departure to

> move beyond an understanding of Jewish history that privileges identitarian contexts [. . .] based on an assumed primacy of religious identity or notions of kinship, and at the same time to cut across the dividing lines separating the 'Christian' from the 'Muslim' Mediterranean, and one imperial or national space from another. (2)

What emerges is not an idealized cosmopolitan Mediterranean of which Jews would be a kind of ideal-type, but a multifaceted landscape in which many different stories of inter-religious relation and connectivity, yet also distinctiveness and separateness, can be found.

The book, which grew out of a conference held in 2016 at the University of California, Irvine, is divided into nine chapters, with an introduction by the two editors. The chapters – except for the first by Seth Schwartz and the third by Andrew Berns – focus on the early modern and modern eras, with special emphasis placed on the period between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Altogether, they demonstrate the diversity of the Jewish Mediterranean and the importance of looking at it from contrasting points of view and based on different methodologies: from economic history and the history of slavery, to literary studies. In the introduction, Lehmann and Marglin provide readers with a detailed discussion of the works of key Mediterranean scholars – from Fernand Braudel and Shlomo D. Goitein to Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell and David Abulafia – as well as their approaches to the study of this region. As noted earlier, and as the editors also clarify, in the chapters that compose the volume the Mediterranean does not stand as metaphor for "hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and symbiosis", but more modestly yet more fruitfully is a category "still useful to think with" (21). The first chapter by Seth Schwartz asks whether Jews were meaningful participants in the ancient Mediterranean, and provides original insights into the usefulness of Mediterranean

anthropology for the study of (ancient) Mediterranean Jewish culture. The following chapter, by Jonathan Ray, is a compelling analysis of Mediterraneanism and Jewish history, based on the author's expertise in Sephardi history and culture. Ray proposes an "endlessly elastic" (62) definition of Mediterranean, which also implies looking at Judaism as an operative conceptual community and not only as a religious faith. Andrew Berns, in the third chapter, tries to answer the question of whether the Mediterranean is ecologically unified – as Fernand Braudel contended in his magnum opus *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949) – or instead divided into microclimates and microregions, as more recently suggested by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (2000). To do so, Berns looks at medieval and early modern Jewish legal debates on the prohibition of mixing wool and linen, shedding light on a kind of geocultural axis that separated "the western Mediterranean and ultramontane Europe" (77).

Daniel Hershenzohn discusses the relation between Jews and the early modern slave trade, clarifying the Mediterranean mobilities – that cut across political and religious boundaries in the northern and southern shore of the sea – which lay beneath it. The fifth chapter by Corey Tazzara is dedicated to religious boundaries in Livorno between the late sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries. Through an analysis of the Tuscan free port, where a Sephardi Jewry flourished, Tazzara tackles the myth of a Mediterranean *convivencia* and reassesses its relevance, depending on the period and area in the Mediterranean of which we are talking. The following chapter, written by Francesca Bregoli, expands on the history of the Jews of Livorno through the case of the Franchetti family and the intracultural ties developed in Jewish commercial networks between the Italian Peninsula and Tunisia in the eighteenth century. One of the most fascinating chapters is perhaps that by Constanze Kolbe on soap and Jewish networks in nineteenth-century Corfu and the southern Adriatic. Kolbe sheds light on little-known Jewish contexts, such as former Venetian territories like Corfu and the coast of today's Montenegro, showing the existence of a resilient Adriatic microregion of cross-border and cross-religious trade in which "Jews, but not 'Jewishness' were crucial" (164).

Le Guide Sam, an annual commercial guide published in the 1920s by the Salonika-born Jew Sam Lévy, is at the centre of the eighth chapter by Devi Mays. Mays argues that this text "sought to promote and reinforce a cohesive Jewish Mediterranean in the interwar period, but one that was connected by commerce rather than a national dream" (184), and that was ultimately based on a distinctive Sephardi identity and on the image of a Ladino-speaking Mediterranean already fading before Lévy's eyes. The last chapter by Clémence Bolouque reconsiders myths of Mediterranean coexistence through the analysis of contemporary literary texts by the Corfu-born Albert Cohen and the Alexandria-born André Aciman. Boulouque proposes nostalgia and loss as central aspects of the literary narration of the Jewish Mediterranean, conceived as "a sentiment, a locus of innocence lost and of powerlessness in a fading colonial order" (192).

The various chapters of *Jews and the Mediterranean* offer interesting models for doing Jewish history *with* the Mediterranean – as the editors explain in the introduction – and for "rethinking the purported fluidity and hybridity of identity, religion, and culture" (16) in this region. If a great emphasis is placed on figures like merchants and on trade-related subjects, other aspects – for example family life and the role of women in Mediterranean Jewish history, on which scholars like Ruth Lamdan, Renée Levine Melammed, and Rachel Simon have written important studies – remain at the margins of the volume. Another issue that perhaps would have merited greater attention is

colonialism, and how the Mediterranean as "a colonial sea" impacted on Jewish identity and culture across the northern and southern shore,[1] in some cases determining the postcolonial destiny of entire communities: think of the Jews of Algeria and their resettlement in France in the early 1960s, after the Algerian War. That said, this collection opens important research paths, thanks to a careful blending of more theoretical contributions with others that instead take their cue from specific case studies and on a close reading of archival sources. *Jews and the Mediterranean* ultimately helps us reflect in original ways on the relation between Mediterranean history, its most renowned contributors – from Braudel to Abulafia – and the field of Jewish history. By doing so, it underlines the importance of rethinking Jewish history through categories that do not, or at least not exclusively, refer to imperial or national boundaries, but are centred around a Mediterranean *continent* – as the French writer Gabriel Audisio wrote in 1935[2] – which includes the sea, its coasts, and the internal areas interconnected to it, whose investigation appear nowadays more relevant than ever.

Notes

1. I take the definition from: Manuel Borutta and Sakis Gekas, "A Colonial Sea: the Mediterranean, 1798–1956", *European Review of History* 19, no. 1 (2012): 1–13.
2. Gabriel Audisio, *Jeunesse de la Méditerranée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1935), 15.

Dario Miccoli
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

dario.miccoli@unive.it
© 2023, Dario Miccoli
https://doi.org/10.1080/09518967.2023.2200426

Check for updates

The Wolf King: Ibn Mardanīsh and the construction of power in al-Andalus, by Abigail Krasner Balbale, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2022, xv + 360 pp., 64 b/w illustrations, 4 maps, 1 chart, US$56.95, ISBN 9781501765872

The dynamic borderland context of twelfth-century Iberia, a world of shifting political frontiers, cultural and intellectual efflorescence, overlapping spheres of culture and authority, and the intersection between various networks of exchange, is the subject of Abigail Krasner Balbale's monograph, *The Wolf King: Ibn Mardanīsh and the Construction of Power in al-Andalus*. The "Wolf King", the figure who is the focus of the study, has been known by several names across the various linguistic and cultural traditions of medieval Iberia: *Rex Lupus* in Latin, *El Rey Lobo* in Spanish, and *Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Saʿd b. Mardanīsh* in Arabic. *The Wolf King* constitutes the first comprehensive English-language study about Ibn Mardanīsh (d. 1172), while also critically assessing the historiographical construction of his legend from the Middle Ages to the present. Drawing upon methodologies from history, Islamic studies, and art history, as well as a rich collection of sources – chronicles, chancery documents, poetry, coinage, architecture, and portable objects – Balbale examines Ibn Mardanīsh's articulation of royal sovereignty, religious identity, and political legitimacy. *The Wolf King* provides