

## Introduction

### *Rereading, Reshaping, Repurposing Objects in Motion across the Mediterranean*

*Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* focuses on the movement and transformation of objects taken as sources and subjects of the history of cross-cultural encounters in the Mediterranean. While the volume explores the Mediterranean as a space extending to the Atlantic, Northern Europe, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it avoids narrow perspectives and overarching narratives associated with the study of one-way routes (e.g., North to South or East to West). Instead, objects are discussed in the context of their multidirectional flows, as they shape connections and encounters both at a local and global level over an extended chronology.

The essays collected in *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* cover a wide range of objects, including ceramics, textiles, doors, books, 'archaeological' artefacts, manuscripts, maps, devotional items, human remains, and relics. While originating in historically specific political and cultural settings, when their mobility is put to the fore objects can throw light on cross-cultural encounters and materialize a connected world. Objects can move by being bought, gifted, bartered, and sold, borrowed or stolen, collected and dispersed, just as they can be modified and destroyed in the process. As they move, objects can transfer knowledge, accumulate layers of meaning, develop

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forms of agency and become deeply entangled with emotions. Therefore, the volume underscores the materiality and mobility of objects, as well as the practices and knowledge intertwined with them, reconstructing how objects came to occupy a central position in a composite world of social and cultural interactions. This diversity is given coherence by focusing not only on phenomena of relational production between humans and non-humans or people and things, but also on specific instances of change within these relationships.

Objects embark on a new journey when their original function and previous life conclude. They begin to serve another purpose, giving rise to fresh connections. The Mediterranean region provides an exceptional vantage point for delving into these dynamics. Beyond being merely a body of water, the Mediterranean serves as a global crossroads and meeting point for three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. Throughout history, this basin has been the stage for highly complex polities, empires, and religions. It has borne witness to war and looting as well as trade and collaborative efforts in scientific advancement. To confine ourselves to the chronology covered by our volume, the Mediterranean witnessed the encounter of Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire with their diverse cultures of power. While the Inquisition took root on its northern shores and Christian powers and the Ottoman Empire clashed on land and sea, knowledge traversed from one linguistic sphere to another, and material cultures of luxury spanned different but commensurable forms of sociability. On the threshold of the contemporary period, the sea itself came to embody different ideas of civilization, simultaneously anchored in the grand narratives of nation-states and rooted in the materiality of archaeology. In this incredibly rich context, objects in motion actively contributed to the transformation of cultures and societies as they underwent continuous repurposing and reinterpretation. These entanglements have left an extraordinary trail of traces — manifested in written references, descriptions, and the surviving objects themselves. Consider an Ottoman banner seized by Polish soldiers during the campaign to liberate Vienna from the Ottoman siege in 1683. It was transformed into an object of veneration in the Italian sanctuary of Loreto, its original purpose being relinquished as it assumed a new role with different significance.<sup>1</sup> According to a story recounted by the French orientalist Antoine Galland (1646–1715), a red satin cloth inscribed with the *shahada*, the Muslim declaration of faith — possibly a war banner as well — had been utilized for decades to cover the canopy during the processions of the Blessed Sacrament at Notre-Dame of Paris. Allegedly, a Maronite observer recognized the Arabic embroidery, restoring its former identity to this opulent piece of Catholic paraphernalia and triggering a

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1 Guidetti, 'Reading Ottoman Banners.'

final transformation: its incineration.<sup>2</sup> A map of the Mediterranean Sea produced in 1579 by 'Ali b. Aḥmad al-Sharafī of Sfax found itself displayed in the offices of the Italian Ministry of Colonies after the invasion of Libya and the Italo-Turkish war (1911–1912). Its presence was not valued for its geographical or artistic qualities but rather for its significance as a trophy.<sup>3</sup> These instances involve the reinterpretation, reshaping, and repurposing of objects, through which identities and cross-cultural relations evolve in a space that is both shared and conflicted. Objects, in fact, are characterized not just as *history-tellers* but as *history-makers*.

Given the extensive scope of this topic and the abundance of scholarly literature on it, the essays collected in this volume clearly do not attempt to present a comprehensive history of the Mediterranean or an exhaustive outline of the material cultures within it. Rather, they collectively highlight the heuristic potential of focusing on different instances of material and semantic transformation as embedded in the changing relationship between humans and objects. By conceptualizing the Mediterranean as both a barrier and a meeting space for diverse polities and communities, and as a unique backdrop for conflicted experiences of cultural, political, economic, and social transformation marked by instances of mobility and displacement, *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* draws upon the fundamental scholarly insights developed in the COST Action 'People in Motion' (PIMo). This scientific community's support and intellectual resources have proven invaluable in both intellectually and materially shaping the research project behind this volume. *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* aspires to make a distinctive contribution to the outstanding body of work produced by PIMo. It aims to offer a specific perspective on the significance of historically construed instances of connection: object repurposing.

Instances of object repurposing help shed light on the ambivalent nature of both homogeneity and fragmentation across the Mediterranean space since repurposing is both a function of connectivity — as it is deployed across frontiers and boundaries — and a function of difference and disruption — as it aims to adapt the object to a new context in several ways. Focusing on the reshaping and repurposing of objects enables us to engage with both the problem of human agency and the problem of diachronic change. However, this approach is most productive when it emphasizes both connections and disconnections at play within different cultural constellations, and when we keep in mind that such phenomena are relevant not only for their past existence but also for the traces they have left in the present. To further explore these topics, however, it is necessary to first delve deeper into three key aspects: the Mediterranean, objects, and their transformation.

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2 Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV's France*, pp. 1–3.

3 Nallino, 'Un mappamondo arabo'.

## Connectivity and the Mediterranean Sea

Understanding objects as both mobile across different spaces and rooted in specific localities demands an appropriate historical and geographical framework. Therefore, while *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* assumes objects as the focus of its methodological approach, engaging with a Mediterranean perspective is equally important.

This importance has a political and ethical dimension that cannot be underestimated and should be addressed first and foremost. Even in recent times, the Mediterranean has been used as a silent backdrop to conflicts and divisions in popular yet academic narratives of history, which perpetuate the ‘clash of civilization’ hypothesis and favour the endurance of the essentialized perception of overarching human groups such as ‘Christian Europe’ and ‘Islam.’<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the last two decades have witnessed a growing perception of mobility in and around the Mediterranean as a problem or even as an existential threat for the societies of the northern shores of the sea. While it is historiographical common sense to reject such dichotomous readings of history as the ‘clash of civilization’ hypothesis, we should not underestimate the fundamental reason why the Mediterranean has long been a privileged object of analysis for historians: by setting the conditions for the creation of links between diverse economies, cultures, and religions, bodies of water such as the Mediterranean are capable of telling stories of exchange, communication, and coexistence as much as stories of conflict, violence, and division.<sup>5</sup> While the abuse of the Mediterranean’s versatility as a repertoire of concepts and images of history has drawn much deserved criticism,<sup>6</sup> in this volume we will strive to strike a balance between these two interpretive poles by looking at the sea as both a bulwark and a passageway, keeping in mind that the Mediterranean should remain an ‘essentially contested concept’<sup>7</sup> and that mobility of objects and people in and around it, be it forced or voluntary,

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4 See for example Pagden, *Worlds at War*, pp. 512–38. The ‘clash of civilization’ hypothesis was first formulated by Arabist Bernard Lewis (1916–2018) in 1990 and then popularized by Harvard social scientist Samuel P. Huntington in a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’.

5 See e.g., Ben-Zaken, *Cross-Cultural Scientific Exchanges*; Greene, *A Shared World*; Abulafia, *The Great Sea*; Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*; Fusaro and others, *Trade and Cultural Exchange*; Calafat, *Une mer jalouse*; Capasso and others, eds, *Il Mediterraneo come risorsa*; Tarantino and others, *Encounters at Sea*; Fogu, *The Fishing Net and the Spider Web*; Santus, *Il “turco” a Livorno*; Rakić and Capriotti, *Images in the Borderlands*; Fritz and von Wyss-Giacosa, eds, *Visual Reflections*.

6 Herzfeld, ‘Practical Mediterraneanism’. On a specific but illuminating case of political abuse of the Mediterranean, see Shavit, ‘The Mediterranean World’, and Shavit, ‘Mediterranean History’.

7 Horden, ‘Mediterranean Excuses’, p. 30.

is not a ‘problem’ to be resolved but a structural phenomenon to be factored in any historical analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Ideologically tinted readings of the Mediterranean, however, are variously connected to the grand debate that has been ongoing on the subject since the appearance of Fernand Braudel’s *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* in 1949. It is essential to delve a little into this debate in order to clarify where *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* stands methodologically. While we acknowledge the long tradition that harks back to Braudel’s *magnum opus*, the volume depends more closely on a critical reception of recent debates revolving around both Braudel’s long-lasting legacy and new contributions to the burgeoning field of ‘Mediterranean Studies’, by the likes of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s *Corrupting Sea* (2000).<sup>9</sup> The most relevant issues for our work concern the problem of agency, the question of connectivity as it relates to the issue of historiographical scale, and finally the aspect of diachronic change as a function of movement in space. Furthermore, it is also essential to discuss the boundaries of ‘our’ Mediterranean.

As is well known, Braudel outlined three levels of history in his large-scale depiction of life in the Mediterranean during the reign of King Philip II of Spain: the very long level of geology, climate, and geography, the middle level of society and culture, and the fleeting level of people and events. Since Braudel preferred the tempo that best suited his ideas about history in the *longue durée*, his perspective on the Mediterranean enabled him to go beyond the contingent moments of human history to identify patterns and consistencies, which in turn allowed him to assert the fundamental unity of the Mediterranean as a human environment and its exceptional character as a connector. Although Braudel oftentimes diverged from his quasi-celestial narrative to focus on close-ups that it is now tempting to refer to as microhistory, his work has been criticized for his deterministic tendency to throw the baby of human actors’ agency out with the bathwater of *histoire événementielle*.<sup>10</sup> Our volume’s focus on objects and the people that moved (with) them aims to follow in the footsteps of these criticisms by giving voice to the agency of people, space, and things. ‘Multiplying the agency’, as Cavan Concannon and Lindsay Mazurek put it by invoking one of Bruno Latour’s watchwords, can be achieved not only by focusing on the faster tempo of society and people,

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8 Antunes and Blažitić, ‘Mobility and Displacement’.

9 On Braudel’s legacy see, in the extensive literature, Marino, ‘The Exile and His Kingdom’; Horden, ‘Mediterranean Excuses’; Fusaro, ‘After Braudel’; the essay collected in Piterberg and others, eds, *Braudel Revisited*; Broodbank, *The Making of the Middle Sea*, pp. 18–25. On more recent trends, see the essay collected in Harris, *Rethinking the Mediterranean*; Zwiernlein, ‘Early Modern History’; and Fiume and Ben-Yehoyada, ‘A proposito di “A Companion to Mediterranean History”’.

10 On Braudel and ‘microhistory’ see e.g., Ginzburg, ‘Microhistory’, pp. 12–20; Fusaro, ‘After Braudel’, pp. 8–10; on the problem of human agency see e.g., Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, pp. xxiv–xxvii.

but also by adopting a multiscale perspective that facilitates the transition between the macro and the micro.<sup>11</sup>

This point also ties into one of the most debated aspects of recent Mediterranean studies: connectivity. In their monumental 2000 study, *The Corrupting Sea*, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell responded to Braudel's framework by attempting to define the Mediterranean as a coherent unit of research. Horden and Purcell devised a fourfold model of primary production that simultaneously served as an explanation and an interpretation of the Mediterranean as a unified historical reality. The key concept of this model was connectivity, which refers to the special logic of communication inherent in the extremely fragmented 'microregions' which constitute the Mediterranean. This connectivity, applicable to goods as well as to technology and ideas, allows the Mediterranean to exist by bridging very different polities and economies. As such, connectivity is presented as the defining trait of this space of exchange and circulation, which is unified precisely because of its diversity — a fascinating oxymoron.<sup>12</sup> However, Horden and Purcell define the exceptional character of the Mediterranean — or 'Mediterraneanness' — as a problem of degree rather than of kind, vis-à-vis other similar geographical and social constellations.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, we prefer not to engage in a discussion of what 'Mediterraneanness' actually is. Rather, we are interested in exploring singular instances of connectivity across the Mediterranean, with an attention to concrete realities that Giovanna Fiume sees as capable of overcoming the abstracting and reifying tendency inherent in Horden and Purcell's model, both in *Corrupting Sea* and in part of the scholarly literature it has generated.<sup>14</sup>

Paying close attention to concrete instances of connection rather than to a naturalized and assumed connectivity also helps us address the problem of diachronic change, which is difficult to account for through Braudel's or even Horden and Purcell's models. Movement, both literal and metaphorical, is at the heart of each essay of *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean*: movement of people and objects across space, and movement of people, objects, and space itself, understood as change over time. While models of Mediterranean history tend to focus on patterns and consistencies, we are more interested in close-up studies of how single lines and nodes of these

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11 Concannon and Mazurek, 'Introduction', pp. 15–16. On the question of historiographical scale, see Revel, ed., *Jeux d'échelles*; Ghobrial, 'Seeing the World'; Ghobrial, 'Moving Stories'.

12 Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, pp. 7–50, 123–72, 485–529. See also Horden and Purcell, "The Mediterranean and "the New Thalassology".

13 Horden and Purcell, "The Mediterranean and "the New Thalassology", p. 734: "The only way in which the Mediterranean is differentiated both from its neighbours and from comparable areas much farther away is by the sheer intensity and complexity of the ingredients". For a discussion of 'Mediterraneanness', see the rich article by Fiume and Ben-Yehoyada, 'A proposito di "A Companion to Mediterranean History"'.  
 14 Fiume and Ben-Yehoyada, 'A proposito di "A Companion to Mediterranean History"', pp. 852–56. The reference is to Horden and Kinoshita, eds, *A Companion to Mediterranean History*.

patterns emerge and move, of the material traces left by movement, and of the multi-layered character bestowed on such traces by instances of rereading, reshaping, and repurposing.

This focus, of course, demands a special attention for the specific roles played by spaces, sites, and places, interpreted as actors provided with agency over both humans and objects rather than as a simple backdrop against which people manipulate things.<sup>15</sup> The problem of movement, in fact, leads us to discuss the communication between the ‘Classic Mediterranean’ — as David Abulafia would call it<sup>16</sup> — and other liquid spaces. *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* reflects on the difficulty of tracing boundaries for the Mediterranean and, most importantly, the need to critically rethink the connections between the Mediterranean and the rest of the world.<sup>17</sup> The Braudelian concept of the Mediterranean as a pulsating electromagnetic field is still relevant here, as it allows us to include in it spaces such as the German-speaking world, Armenia, the Atlantic Ocean, and the Low Countries.<sup>18</sup> However, the concept of pulsation presupposes a heart and is thus conducive to a centre-periphery dichotomy. For this reason, we should limit the validity of this metaphor to some specific instances, such as the Iberian colonization of the islands of the Atlantic. In other cases, it is better to think about the Mediterranean as echoing, remodulating, and retransmitting pulses coming from other regions of the world, such as China and the Indian Ocean. In a sense, it is best to see the ‘Classic Mediterranean’ as a field of forces which emanates and incorporates vibrations simultaneously, just like any other part of the world, to allow the emergence of specific cultural constellations. For instance, as we will explore in this volume, consider the specific devotional practices developed in the Canary Islands, which intricately wove together threads from Catholicism and various religious cultures from Africa. Similarly, examine the unique scientific understanding of porcelain elaborated by natural philosophers who drew on intellectual traditions rooted in Europe to give meaning to otherworldly objects originating in China, making their journey through the Middle East and then across the Indian and Atlantic oceans. In this perspective, we may perhaps accept Purcell’s view on the Mediterranean’s distinctiveness as rooted in it ‘being a meeting point not just of all the various spaces within but also of all the extremely diverse zones of transition to what lies outside.’<sup>19</sup>

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- 15 On this point and the so-called ‘spatial turn’, see Kümin and Usborne, ‘At Home and in the Workplace’; Guldi, ‘What is the Spatial Turn?’. For some examples in recent scholarship, see Tazzara, *The Free Port of Livorno*, Hanß and McEwan, eds, *The Habsburg Mediterranean*, and Tarantino and von Wyss-Giacosa, eds, *Twelve Cities – One Sea*.
- 16 Abulafia, ‘Mediterraneans’, pp. 67–75.
- 17 On this topic see the essays collected in Horden and Kinoshita, eds, *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, Part VII; Abulafia, ‘Mediterraneans’; Purcell, ‘The Boundless Sea of Unlikeness’; Sutherland, ‘Southeast Asian History’.
- 18 Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, pp. 168–230.
- 19 Purcell, ‘The Boundless Sea of Unlikeness’, p. 53.

## Objects in Motion

In the last two decades, a ‘return to things’ has taken place within the realm of social sciences and humanities, and objects are now seen as producers of knowledge rather than just subjects of study. Objects, in fact, have been released from the geographical and semantic fixity of a constructed origin, and are increasingly being investigated as forms in transformation.<sup>20</sup> The anthropology of material culture, literary scholarship, and sociology have contributed significantly to this paradigm shift. For example, anthropologist Tim Ingold has thoroughly criticized the divide between subject and object, form and substance, mind and matter, in order to demonstrate the connect-edness — indeed the inseparability — of culture and materiality.<sup>21</sup> Literary scholar and critical theorist Bill Brown, foregoing issues of representation, has focused on the thing in itself and equally contributed to the debate about the subject-object divide, envisaging ‘thingness’ as a state of liminality, uncertainty, and ambiguity, which is revealed when objects exit their normal regimes of functionality and which consequently ‘really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.’<sup>22</sup> The late French sociologist Bruno Latour, among his many accomplishments, greatly contributed to the shaping of Actor Network Theory by integrating human and non-human actors within social networks, illustrating the active roles played by both animate and inanimate entities in the formation, mediation, and consolidation of social, cultural, and political relations.<sup>23</sup> As archaeologist Ian Hodder has put it when introducing his dependency-focused concept of entanglement between humans and things:

discussions on the agency, vibrancy, and vitality of inanimate objects, have converged upon a somewhat shared notion: that subject and object, mind and matter, humans and things mutually shape one another. These diverse approaches concur on the fundamental premise that human existence and social life are contingent upon material things, inextricably entwined with them. Humans and their material counterparts are co-constitutive, engaged in an intricate web of relational production.<sup>24</sup>

In this framework, objects, things, and materiality have acquired greater importance for the historical sciences. In this field, this revival has a deeply layered history reaching back to Thorstein Veblen and Werner Sombart even

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20 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Boivin, *Material Cultures, Material Minds*; Miller, *Stuff*; Struck and others, ‘Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History’; Gerritsen and Riello, eds, *The Global Lives of Things*; Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things*.

21 In the extensive literature produced by Ingold, see the essays collected in Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, and Ingold and Hallam, ‘Making and Growing: An Introduction’.

22 Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, p. 4.

23 In his extensive scholarly production, see especially Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, and Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

24 Hodder, ‘The Entanglements of Humans and Things’, p. 19.



before (once again) Braudel's fundamental study on material culture in his *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme* (1979).<sup>25</sup> In fact, in a volume devoted to the role that objects have played in the European study of the past across the early modern age, Peter N. Miller has been able to claim that there have been many 'material turns' in Western historiography before the current one.<sup>26</sup> However, it is certain that in the last two decades historians, art historians, archaeologists, and museum curators have started to draw upon the insights of anthropology and other critical humanities to put matter at the heart of their work, asking questions about how history *of* as well as *from* things can be done.<sup>27</sup>

First of all, objects can raise and answer questions about connectivity, as they bring into contact different areas of the world and shape relationships between them. In fact, if every society has its own distinctive material culture, as Paula Findlen reminds us, 'every society also has a material culture developed over many centuries through commerce and exchange with other parts of the world', not to mention the fact that portions of material culture emerge in the zones where different societies intersect.<sup>28</sup> Over the centuries, objects have been collected, exhibited, used, and narrated to show the supposed closeness between geographically distant cultures, or, on the contrary, the supposed incompatibility between them.<sup>29</sup>

It is no surprise that objects and materiality have risen prominently in many different variants of global history.<sup>30</sup> While 'connecting' objects can be staple commodities such as cotton, they can also be luxury objects such as silk and porcelain,<sup>31</sup> thereby offering the historian the opportunity to delve into different social contexts, and it is not always easy to take properly into account the role played by localized production or the complexity of multilateral exchange vis-à-vis the alleged centrality of Europe as the prime mover of the circulation of goods and people.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, objects can produce and evoke positive as well as negative instances of connectivity: sometimes they shape trade, cultural exchange, political dialogue; at other times they come to embody exploitation, oppression, political enmity. Furthermore, objects can even refer to instances of disconnections, whenever contact and

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25 Findlen, 'Introduction', pp. 9–13. On the deeply layered history of this revival, see e.g., the varied contents of Candlin and Guins, eds, *The Object Reader*.

26 Miller, *History and Its Objects*, pp. 1–20, 33–34.

27 See e.g., Lubar and Kingery, *History from Things*; Harvey, *History and Material Culture*; Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things*; Gerritsen and Riello, eds, *Writing Material Culture History*.

28 Findlen, 'Preface to the Second Edition', pp. xxvi–xxviii.

29 See e.g. Tarantino and von Wyss-Giacosa, eds, *Through Your Eyes*.

30 See e.g., Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers*; Gerritsen, 'From Long-Distance Trade to the Global Lives of Things'; Gerritsen and Riello, eds, *The Global Lives of Things*.

31 Berg and others, eds, *Goods from the East*; on cotton and silk see respectively Riello, *Cotton*, and Schäfer and others, *Threads of Global Desire*; on porcelain, Finlay, *The Pilgrim Art*.

32 Riello, 'Objects in Motion', pp. 33–35.

communication break down and the involvements between sets of peoples and different material cultures subside and disintegrate.

Within this context, and in light of the increasing attention paid to the material results and legacies of European imperialism and colonialism, the global dissemination of objects which entailed violent acts of uprooting, renaming, and status alteration has been placed under scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> The plunder of cultural objects, human remains, art, and artefacts, has long created conflict, and its consequences pervade the museum landscape on all sides of the Mediterranean (and beyond). Even the voices of those who tell the story of the objects face scrutiny. The format ‘the history of *something* in 100 objects’, introduced in 2010 by the former director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, has been hugely successful. However, the lone, white, British, male, all-embracing voice dominating as the sole author of the book (and of similar projects) has been heavily criticized, for example by the online collaborative project ‘100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object’, which rejects any form of universal narrative.<sup>34</sup> The ongoing debates surrounding the repatriation of cultural heritage, after all, centre precisely on the movements and transfers of objects, either advocating or deploring the potential of further displacements.

Connectivity and disconnection indeed lead us to discuss issues of mobility and immobility. The paradigm or concept of mobility has underpinned much of the scholarly literature on cross-cultural interactions in the last two decades, constituting yet another methodological ‘turn’ in the humanities and the social sciences.<sup>35</sup> *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* draws upon the intellectual resources made available across different disciplines by the ‘mobility turn’ to construct its general framework of reference. However, while movement is a constitutive part of the entanglements between humans and objects at the core of this volume, it is important to clarify that movement itself is not the primary focus of our attention. In response to criticism of reductionistic tendencies in many mobility studies, our volume underscores mobility as a historically determined process: analysing this process enables researchers to better understand various human and non-human experiences

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33 Brodie and others, *Stealing History*; Van Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted Hands*; Hicks, *The British Museums*; Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art*.

34 See e.g., MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*; see also the recent catalogue of the permanent exhibition of the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration in Paris: Gokalp, ed., *Une histoire de l'immigration en 100 objets*. The project ‘100 Histories of 100 Worlds in 1 Object’ can be accessed at <<https://100histories100worlds.org/>>.

35 In the already extensive literature see e.g., Cresswell, *On the Move*, pp. 1–25; Sheller and Urry, ‘The New Mobilities Paradigm’; Lucassen and Lucassen, ‘The Mobility Transition Revisited’; Greenblatt, ‘Cultural Mobility’; Adey and others, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*; Bleichmar and Martin, eds, *Objects in Motion*; Ghobrial, ‘Moving Stories and What They Tell Us’; Fraser, ed., *The Mobility of People and Things in the Early Modern Mediterranean*; Gonzales Martin and others, ‘Cities in Motion, Mobility and Urban Space’; Rossetto and Tartakowsky, ‘The Materialities of Belonging’; Nelles and Salzberg, eds, *Connected Mobilities in the Early Modern World*.

involving movement — in our case, intellectual, cultural, and social changes embedded in objects in motion. In addition, in our perspective it is essential to consider this movement as potentially finite, always on the verge of ceasing: mobility acquires significance also in the light of immobility,<sup>36</sup> just as familiar objects are always on the verge of being modified and acquiring new meanings and purposes.

Objects, however, are more than just the embodiment of a connection or things that people can move. They create their own spaces and possess agency.<sup>37</sup> Arjun Appadurai's work highlights how objects have agency within social and cultural contexts. They actively shape human experiences and relationships, thereby acquiring a social life of their own.<sup>38</sup> Through their materiality, objects become imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect and influence individual and collective identities and practices. As a result, they also contribute to shaping their own meshing with human actors: they affect their use and reuse, their rereading and repurposing, their commodification and singularization, value fluctuations, and shifting emotional significance. Considering connectivity, mobility, and materiality as integral aspects of objects provided with agency allows us to focus on the dynamic interplay among objects, practices, and values. This interplay forms an adequate foundation for a history that revolves around objects and is narrated through their perspectives.

However, when discussing the life of objects, another element should be considered: their relationship with emotions. Stephanie Trigg and Anna Welch recently discussed the role of objects and material culture in the emotional life of the medieval and early modern period. They encourage us to contemplate both the objects themselves and the discourse surrounding them, be it contemporary or successive, as evidence of changing emotional responses to the past.<sup>39</sup> According to Jo Labanyi, who claims that 'it is only possible to study things in terms of what people do with them',<sup>40</sup> the study of material culture becomes deeply connected to the history of emotions. Humans and communities are bound affectively to objects, whether they possess monetary value or are seemingly valueless, everyday items, precious possessions, or even magical objects. Affection for these things can be lost or reignited, and just as emotions shape objects, objects also shape emotions.<sup>41</sup>

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36 On the concept of immobility, see e.g., the discussion in Bélanger and Silvey, 'An Im/mobility Turn'.

37 On the agency of objects and the debates revolving around this issue see e.g., Tilley, 'Ethnography and Material Culture'; Hoskins, 'Agency, Biography and Objects'; Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; the essays in Coole and Frost, eds, *New Materialisms*; Olsen, *In Defense of Things*; Van Eck and others, 'The Biography of Cultures'.

38 Appadurai, 'Introduction'.

39 Trigg and Welch, 'Objects, Material Culture and the History of Emotions'.

40 Labanyi, 'Doing Things: Emotion, Affect and Materiality'.

41 Downes and others, 'Introduction'; Jaritz, ed. *Emotions and Material Culture*.

If we approach this issue from the perspective of memory-related studies, we can draw upon Astrid Erll's argument, who posits that within the field of memory studies, individual cultures tend to be conceived as 'separatory'. In contrast, she advocates for considering memory (and its material manifestations) as interconnected and constantly travelling. Erll ultimately claims that 'all cultural memory must travel, be kept in motion, in order to stay alive, to have an impact both on individual minds and social formations'.<sup>42</sup> Objects can play a pivotal role in this dynamic, as emphasized by Joanne Begiato. She notes that objects can distort or compress time when encountered by different emotional communities and cultures, underscoring their role as time-travellers.<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, objects possess a life as much as an afterlife, traceable through their 'routes' — the ways their meanings and the feelings they evoke change over time, or as carriers of different meanings acquired through their journeys. Yet they also prompt individuals to reflect on the past, perhaps evoking memories and nostalgia, just as they can serve as lessons or warnings. Simultaneously, they inspire individuals to look toward the future, instilling feelings projected to future generations. In this way, objects are not static entities but dynamic agents that actively engage with the flow of time, leaving imprints on both individual and collective consciousness.

### Rereading, Reshaping, Repurposing

The insights highlighted thus far are at the heart of *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean*. However, the volume aims to connect the repurposing and 'second-handedness' of displaced objects — namely the acquisition of new forms, functions, and meanings as they move — with the changing relations and (self-)perceptions of the communities involved in their displacement. The volume aims to establish this connection as a research perspective, both conceptually and empirically, by discussing the reciprocal influences between such repurposing on the one side and, on the other, the various political, cultural, and emotional investments that accompany the life of the object: production, possession, displacement, modification, oblivion, and reclaim. Political and cultural change, understood as the historical shaping of individual and collective identities at different levels, plays a particularly important role. In this framework, people and things are best discussed as jointly as possible, and for this reason it is useful to flesh out two perspectives which are essential in this regard.

First of all, the concept of the 'biography of an object' is instrumental in illuminating the transformative journey and cultural significance that objects acquire throughout their existence. By examining the social, economic, and

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42 Erll, 'Travelling Memory', p. 12.

43 Begiato, 'Moving Objects', pp. 240–41.

cultural dimensions involved, we can unravel the intricate narratives woven into the life of an object. While Appadurai's vision of the object as a social actor effectively leads to seeing objects as having a social life of their own, Igor Kopytoff's notion of commoditization as a regulated but unstable process of becoming highlights the diverse trajectories of objects, all moving through various hands and spaces, each interaction leaving its mark. The ownership and use of an object change over time, reflecting shifting social hierarchies, economic conditions, and cultural preferences. This biographical approach reveals how objects can serve as markers of social status, personal memories, and historical change. They become social actors, participants in exchange systems, bearers of memories, and narrators of cultural histories. By exploring the biography of an object, we unravel the layers of meaning that are embedded in its journey, offering valuable insights into the diverse and interconnected nature of human experiences.<sup>44</sup> One insight by Kopytoff is particularly valuable here. Objects can be seen as continually shifting between states of homogenization — that is, commoditization — and singularization because these transformations depend upon categories of value and judgement which in turn shift according to their ever-changing social context.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the order of things in a given society is patterned on the structure of the order of people. However, Kopytoff suggests that 'societies constrain both these worlds simultaneously and in the same way, constructing objects as they construct people.'<sup>46</sup> The simultaneity of the social construction of objects and people is particularly apparent in the case of 'diasporic objects.' These objects, like their human counterparts, emerge from cultural encounters with the unfamiliar. They can be described as hybrid entities, sites of productive engagements with cultural others. The Atlantic slave trade, for instance, complicates the strict categorization of diaspora as solely pertaining to humans, as it depends on the conflating of the perception of humans and objects. Therefore, the human element remains relevant in all its aspects: the emotional and affective, but also the bodily. Sara Ahmed has vigorously turned the attention to the relations between object and bodies, urging us to contemplate 'how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, that are available within the bodily horizon.'<sup>47</sup>

The conditions for a unified research perspective on people and things are further clarified by Tim Ingold's anthropology of material culture. Ingold suggests that every organism is a node in a field of relationships. Rather than viewing organisms as isolated entities, he emphasizes their embeddedness in a complex web of connections. In addition, Ingold proposes that ways of acting

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44 Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things'; see also Gosden and Marshall, 'The Cultural Biography of Objects'; Drazin, 'The Object Biography'; Shalem, 'The Second Life of Objects'.

45 A recent example of this dynamic is offered for Islamic objects in eighteenth-century Europe by Dolezalek and Guidetti, eds, *Rediscovering Objects*.

46 Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things', pp. 89–90.

47 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, p. 2.

in the environment are also ways of perceiving it: action and perception are not separate processes but deeply intertwined. This perspective challenges the notion of a clear separation between humans and nature, and mind and body, suggesting that humans are intertwined with the larger ecological fabric, and that our interactions with the environment shape our understanding and perception of it. In this perspective things are not *made* but *grown*: the form of an artefact is not imposed from above but emerges through a play of human and non-human forces. So, what people do is not shape substances into given forms, but rather they establish the conditions for the growth of things by interacting with the environment. The growth of artefacts can be seen as the self-transformation over time of the system of relations within which an artefact came into being: the artefact is the crystallization of activity within a relational field, its (ir)regularities of form embodying the (ir)regularities of movement that gave rise to it. If constancy of form is the function of the generative principles embedded in the material conditions of their production, change in form is then a function of a change of those material conditions. In the same way, skills — the specific ways in which practitioners interact with their surroundings, incorporating both embodied knowledge and cognitive processes — are not transmitted as fixed entities but rather regrow in each generation. Cultural variations, then, can be understood as variations of skill, and the transmission of cultural knowledge as its ever-changing inscription in objects and features.

Movement is thus truly generative of the object: objects belong to a current of activity and, in our view, repurposing is a given moment in this current. On the other hand, ‘rereading’ objects — taking a second look at them in an attempt to reconstruct the missing links in the chain of transformative moments that form their biography — is a historiographical gesture that brings the products of human activity back to life, even though what is restored is not an object’s last symbolic or practical function. Rather, it is a new one, another layer on the semantic palimpsest of the object, which specifically encompasses its newfound value as a historical source.<sup>48</sup>

## The Essays

It has been noted that the histories of objects can be told as linear, overarching narratives.<sup>49</sup> While the essays in *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* appear to follow a chronological order from the seventh to the early twentieth century, the volume’s adopted chronology is actually much more layered. It moves from the relatively narrow scale of individual objects being displaced to

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48 On this conceptualization of *rereading*, see the essays collected in Falucci and others, eds, *Rereading Travellers to the East*.

49 See e.g., Hicks and Whyte, eds, *Cultural History of Objects*.

the much broader one of the histories of their reinterpretation and repurposing. Here, the objects act as centres of gravity, pulling space and time in their direction. This framework is crucial for emphasizing both the specific changes in the use of objects and the agency of objects as they shape the way they are reread and repurposed. It is worth reiterating that the concepts of movement and mobility are not conceived here as universal categories but rather as historically determined phenomena and processes. Consequently, studying the mobility of objects across different ages requires scholarly proficiency in the specific social and cultural processes at play in different settings. Such an approach can only be navigated by scholars with diverse training in various disciplines and methodologies. Therefore, the cohesion of different studies spanning a thousand years is only achievable through a sincere commitment to multidisciplinary and cooperation across disciplines.

The volume opens with two studies on the reuse of objects symbolizing power and prestige in the Mediterranean space of the Byzantine Empire. Anna C. Kelley's essay delves into the multifaceted agency of Byzantine imperial silks in shaping identities and communicating power across the Mediterranean between the seventh and the twelfth centuries. Kelley examines the production of Byzantine silks in Constantinople, highlighting the strategic weaving of iconographic symbols to denote imperial authority and legitimacy. She then explores the diplomatic exchanges and gifting practices that enabled these silks to project political relationships and foster alliances, before shifting the focus to the reuse of Byzantine silks in the West, where they became vehicles for Western rulers to establish their own narratives of legitimacy in competition with the Byzantine Empire. However, Byzantine silks took on a distinctive role in the religious sphere too, where their associations with antiquity and divine rule led to their sanctification as visual representations of Christian glory. The cycles of reuse and ritual use endowed these silks with accumulated social memory, making them crucial agents in constructing and contesting individual and communal identities. Together, these findings demonstrate the transformative power of Byzantine imperial silks, as they transcended their material form to become potent symbols of political power, cultural rivalry, and religious sanctity. Judith Utz's essay, in turn, focuses on the arrival of Byzantine bronze doors in Italy in the second half of the eleventh century and raises fundamental questions about the circulation of practices, techniques, and material models across political and religious boundaries. In fact, these doors were the embodiment of exchange networks that involved transcultural biographies of artists the traces of which it is still possible to retrieve reading the inscriptions left on the doors. This movement of people, techniques, and materials was thus embodied in a specific object whose mobility, as counter-intuitive as this may sound, may have constituted a fundamental aspect of its materiality. In fact, Utz argues that it was precisely their intended transportability that determined the form and structure of those doors. Mostly commissioned by Italian merchants with close ties to Constantinople, the doors consisted of rather standardized panels and framing elements which

were cast in the Byzantine capital. The artists of Constantinople were able to refer to regional and local models made of wood: in fact, the form of these doors also depended on a change of material, which may have been accompanied by a change in meaning. The shimmering golden brilliance and distinctive iconography of the doors, along with their material composition, promised salvation and played a central role in their popularity and success in Italy and possibly throughout the Mediterranean region, even though the details about the doors' incorporation into specific rites and rituals remains difficult to reconstruct.

The next four essays, which collectively cover the early modern period, delve deeper in questions of human-object connection. They explore the reciprocal and simultaneous processes through which people and things shape each other, revealing instances of objects 'growing' as their environment shifts and changes. In her essay, Maria Vittoria Comacchi draws on the history of 'Oriental' studies and on the history of reading practices to discuss the role played by the French traveller and scholar Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) in the development of cartographical knowledge, in light of his relationship with a specific copy of Abū al-Fidā's mathematical geography, the *Taqwīm al-buldān*. This exemplar was likely brought to Europe from Damascus, annotated copiously by Postel to foster his geographical and cartographical interests, it was then pawned when Postel was financially strained during an Inquisition process, after which it circulated widely among sixteenth-century geographers and cartographers and seventeenth-century Arabists, and finally ended up in the Vatican Library as a consequence of the ravages of the Thirty Years War. Through the reconstruction of this particular object's biography, Comacchi not only shows the tangle between it and its first European owner and student, but also sheds light on the geographical and cartographic roots of the 'Arabick interest' of early modern European scholars. What is more, she highlights how a knowledge transfer from the mathematical geography of Abū al-Fidā' to early modern European cartography could greatly depend on the new purpose assigned to a single manuscript.

Claudia Geremia, on the other hand, discusses how objects can intersect with questions of gender, race, and religion. Her essay focuses on the use of objects in ritual practices within African cultures and their subsequent reuse in a different context, namely the Canary Islands. The analysis is based on records from the Spanish inquisitorial trials that involved enslaved African women accused of witchcraft. These records provide detailed information about the enslaved individuals who were transported from the Maghreb and West Africa to the Canary Islands, with a particular emphasis on the material culture associated with their religious devotion. The objects they possessed and utilized, such as the *bolsa*, were either crafted in Africa or produced in the Canaries, where they can still be found in the archives of the Museo Canario. While these objects in motion held significant spiritual value from the start, their meanings underwent transformation within the cultural environment of the Spanish islands. Not only did they acquire Catholic spiritual connotations



as articles of religious devotion, but they were also employed by inquisitors as juridical evidence in their witchcraft trials. In essence, this case exemplifies the profound semantic ambivalence of objects and how institutions and power dynamics can determine specific processes of repurposing, influencing the social definition of people and things simultaneously.

In his essay about the life journey of Rabbi Benjamin Me'eli HaKohen, Oded Cohen recounts a diametrically opposed story, where the simultaneous shaping of objects and people is the result of the personal development of this fascinating 'wandering Jew' as he navigates the European Jewish book world of the eighteenth century. From his departure from Jerusalem to his arrival in Livorno, and his eventual settlement in Amsterdam, Benjamin undergoes a profound transformation in his self-image and perception of his place in the world. Initially a passive player, Benjamin transitions into an active participant, becoming a publishing entrepreneur and a senior member of the Republic of Letters. Throughout his migrations, Benjamin immerses himself in the literary world and printing industry, working in various Hebrew printing centres and collaborating with influential figures. His endeavours range from publishing the works of past and present scholars to bringing previously unknown essays to print, showcasing his entrepreneurial spirit and awareness of the material significance of the book industry. Benjamin's consolidation as a literary figure is evident in his integration into the Amsterdam literary milieu and his active role in editing, proofreading, and promoting books, which clearly existed for him as semantic and material manifestations at the same time. Ultimately, Benjamin's journey exemplifies a shift from being chosen by books to actively choosing the world of books himself, in a way reversing the dependency commonly associated with entanglements.

In her essay, Tülay Artan examines the evolving nature of luxury in the Ottoman Empire during the early modern period, focusing on imports from India and further eastern regions. Taking into account the difficult question of sources — records regarding luxury objects in Ottoman accounts and inventories are scarce and perishable items have vanished from repositories, collections, and museums — Artan highlights the multifaceted nature and the complex dynamics surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of luxury in the Ottoman Empire. She explores the Ottoman ruling elite's efforts to display wealth and gain social status through luxurious items, while also examining moralizing discourses that criticized excess and flamboyance. Court chroniclers and bureaucrats, in fact, expressed their concerns about the competition between imported goods and local products, encouraging the support of domestic production, just as they critiqued the use of precious materials like silver and gold in luxury clothing, suggesting alternative materials and proposing restrictions on certain imports. Artan's work thus uncovers the Ottoman elite's fascination with exotic and extravagant objects, while also shedding light on critical perspectives and concerns regarding the societal and economic impact of certain sets of luxurious items. It emphasizes the need to consider multiple factors, including trade, economic policies, and

social stratification, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Ottoman concept of luxury.

The following two essays, while exploring two very different sets of objects, raise similar questions about the material boundaries that define what is considered natural versus artificial, organic versus inorganic, and about how those boundaries could be crossed or negated through intellectual and material strategies. In his essay, Matthew Martin delves into the historical context and intellectual frameworks surrounding the import and then the production of porcelain in Europe, with a particular focus on the Dresden porcelain project in the early eighteenth century. It reveals a fascinating interplay between speculative natural philosophy, alchemical traditions, and practical experimentation. The narrative begins by examining the cultural fascination with porcelain in Europe and the various attempts to understand its nature. Early scholars like Cardano and Scaliger approached porcelain through the lens of natural philosophical speculations, perceiving it as a quasi-natural substance. The inclusion of porcelain objects in medieval treasury collections alongside precious hardstone vessels further reinforced the perception of porcelain as a mineral-like material. Moving on to consider the Dresden porcelain project, headed by scholars Von Tschirnhaus and Böttger, the essay highlights the connection between their practical experimentation and the intellectual traditions of earlier natural historians. While the focus was on practicality, the project drew inspiration from alchemical concepts of emulating and manipulating natural processes to create a mineral substance. The successful production of *Jaspisporcelain*, a high-fired red stoneware, using iron-rich red clay further exemplified the fusion of alchemical and natural philosophical ideas. The subsequent quest for white porcelain led to the discovery of kaolin-bearing white clay, resulting in the long-sought-after 'white gold' porcelain. Importantly, Martin's essay emphasizes the persistent influence of speculative natural philosophy traditions rooted in Europe, despite the increasing availability of imported Chinese porcelain and first-hand accounts of Chinese ceramic production. Ultimately, this exploration illuminates the transformation of porcelain into a European artefact, with its use, significance, and materiality assimilated and even reborn into European intellectual and cultural frameworks.

In his article, Leonardo Rossi explores the complex world of bodies with religious significance, focusing on the late modern age and the spread of 'corpi santi' or incorrupt bodies throughout Catholic nations across the Mediterranean. These bodies, displayed in crystal cases and appearing serene and without signs of corruption, symbolized the triumph of the Christian faith over death and sin while transitioning from organic to inorganic status. The phenomenon of incorrupt bodies and the transfer of bones from the Roman catacombs has distant roots, but in the late modern age, these items took on innovative characteristics. In particular, the use of wax and ceroplastics allowed for standardization and mass production, making these bodies easily replicable. The Italian model of exposed ceroplastic bodies became widely

recognized and emulated, with thousands of bodies of saints, founders, and martyrs circulating throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, and even more distant lands. The article highlights the networks of holiness and the exchange of relics between Rome and various regions. The recognition and replicability of these models played a significant role in their success. Seeing a body in a glass case in a place of worship indicated its religious significance, inspiring emulation among the faithful and leading to requests for similar relics. The article acknowledges that the study of bodies with religious significance is still in its early stages, but promises fruitful results and discoveries as scholars delve deeper into this topic, broadening our understanding of the material dimension of holiness, cults, and popular beliefs, and shedding new light on the relationships between Rome, the Mediterranean, and beyond.

In the final essay, Fedra Pizzato examines the history of the archaeological site known as Scoglio del Tonno (Taranto) from its discovery in 1899 to the onset of the Republican era in Italy (1946). This investigation aims to elucidate the complex interplay between science and politics in Italy, spanning three very different socio-political contexts: the Kingdom of Italy, Fascist Italy, and the early Republican era. Pizzato interrogates the relationship between scientific paradigms and scientific communities, and this forms the basis for her reconstruction of the 'data journey' of scientific artefacts. This exploration leads her to raise two key questions: why do archaeological findings move from the discovery site to other museums? And why, even though they have been considered important enough to be moved, are they sometimes left aside by museum curators? Pizzato deconstructs the socio-political constraints affecting the scientific interpretation of archaeological findings, as well as the personal strategies adopted by scientists in evaluating and reshaping archaeological material. These factors caused the movement of findings from the discovery site to national museums, producing a shift in the social and political meaning of objects. In addition, this foray into the history of science also enables *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* to conclude with a reflection about the meaning of the Mediterranean as a potentially politically charged historical concept. What was at stake in the scientific definition of the archaeological remains of Scoglio del Tonno was indeed their alleged connection either to a northern European civilization or to a 'Mediterranean' origin, in a period when Italy was frantically seeking a historical identity commensurate with its geopolitical ambitions.

As highlighted in the initial pages of this introductory essay, it is important to note that *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* does not offer a comprehensive exploration of the subject of object mobility in the Mediterranean region throughout the centuries. However, the collected works in this volume, engaging in a continuous dialogue with each other and with the discussed historiography, present a rich panorama of interconnected themes, spaces, case studies, and methodological considerations. Within this volume, when examining specific objects, the focus lies on the evolving relationship between humans and things, as well as the construction of identities and their permanent

reconsideration. The notable achievement of *Travelling Matters across the Mediterranean* lies precisely in its ability to underscore the multi-directionality, diachronicity, and interconnectedness of the flow of ‘matters’ that undergo constant reuse, reinvention, and reshaping.

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