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Histories in the Mediterranean – AGORA Webinar Talks about Mediterranean Ports

John Hanna & Martin Valinger Sluga

What do we learn about port cities when the Mediterranean Sea is the point of reference? The Agora Webinar *Talks about Mediterranean Ports*, held on 24th of April 2021, aimed to establish a dialogue for engaging with "histories *in* the Mediterranean". The Agora research platform of the German University of Cairo organized this webinar as part of activities related to the [Union for the Mediterranean (UFM) Action Plan](#), to widen the focus of Mediterranean studies to include economic, social, and spatial changes in different cities along the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. In this blog, John Hanna and Martin Valinger report on this event, which brought together a varied group of scholars in the fields of architecture and urban planning with a focus on Mediterranean port cities.

Technological and infrastructural transformations do not only impact the cities where they are located, but often extend to the hinterland as well. The chair of the session, Carola Hein from Delft University of Technology, highlighted how port city regions bring a very distinct urban form. In this session, Hein highlighted how the PortCityFutures initiative advances the research on the long-standing port-city relationships to understand them as much more complex than purely technological. One of the methods to do so is through mapping, which can be utilized as a form of an explorative process to reveal new knowledge and experiences of a certain territory.

Lucija Ažman Momirski (University of Ljubljana) presented an example of this process. Students explored the different features (such as

topography, shipping routes, port locations, urbanization, railways, and roads) of four major port city regions in the Northern Adriatic: Koper, Trieste, Monfalcone, Venice, Rijeka and Ravenna and their hinterlands. The work built on the mapping guidelines developed by Yvonne van Mil (2021, in progress) as part of the PortCityFutures initiative. Ažman Momirski explained how students drew several interesting conclusions from the maps of maritime networks and flows, for example that Koper and Trieste maintained a more active position in the area in relation to the other ports, or that the ports on the western side of the Adriatic were developed around swamp areas, which increased their defensibility making them useful for military functions. A closer analysis of the road networks and transport systems in the hinterland show how this was crucial for increasing the capacity of the port, which becomes especially clear in the case of Trieste. What this work reveals is that the hierarchical importance of the analysed port regions was often related to the different political and geographical circumstances in which they existed and remained resilient.

Similarly, Carlo Alberini from Mohammed VI Polytechnic University discussed how the development of port cities in the Northern Mediterranean has always been directly linked to the geography and orography (the study of the topographic relief of mountains) of the context. Focusing on the port cities of Genoa and Barcelona, Alberini emphasized how the topography of territory shaped their urban form and defined their opportunities to link directly with the hinterland. Alberini also made a clear distinction between cities with harbours and a port city. For him, a port city is the highest expression of maritime cultural development which strongly intersects with social and economic aspects of urban life.

Modern port city relationships are complex. The expansion of containerization and oil logistics widened the gap between the interests of the port and those of the city. Said Madani from Ferhat Abbas University of Setif presented a historical account of the development of the coastal town of Skikda by looking at the development of its port. Madani

highlighted how the domination of the oil landscape in contrast to the town's natural landscape hinders its touristic potential. He also explained that while the Algerian economy is highly dependent on maritime transport, only little development has been done to expand and upgrade Algerian ports. Given its strategic importance as a gateway to Africa, Skikda faces the opportunity and challenge to play a bigger role in China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). While the current port activity in Skikda is based on the export of oil, a focus on logistics and containerization could bring a good alternative for sustaining the port's future in the post-oil era.

As the final speaker of the webinar, José Manuel Pagés Madrigal from the German University in Cairo, presented several case studies from Egypt. In his urban analysis, he showed the evolution of urban form, segregation of waterfront and connectivity to the hinterland of the port cities of Alexandria, Damietta, Port Said and Suez. Madrigal highlighted how Egyptian port cities play an important role in the complex network of relations of the country's urban system. He argued that improving the connectivity between the Red Sea (Suez) and the Mediterranean (Alexandria) through Cairo could be a good option for the future.

During the discussion, Hocine Bougdah from the University of Westminster pointed to the "Achilles heel" of port cities in the Southern Mediterranean: governance. He observed that even though the growth of port activity and trade is often reflected in increasing rates of urbanization, the public sector does not plan public infrastructure in line with the needs of newcomers and original inhabitants of the area. In his general opinion, finding ways to improve the governance at every level (from local to national) and to emphasize the impact of good governance systems, would enable the people living in port cities of Northern Africa to reap the benefits that the ports are bringing in a way that their European counterparts do.

Roberto Rocco from Delft University of Technology agreed that the lack of

coordination and integration between different levels and sectors remains the biggest problem in port cities in general, and proposed that one of the ways to achieve good governance is through the creation of common values and vocabulary. He pointed to the example of the Union for the Mediterranean's (UFM) Action Plan that invites country members to discuss common visions and create a common governance framework that could be applied in different parts of the Mediterranean region.

These remarks opened a fruitful discussion on whether common values and visions are actually enough to change the status quo of poor governance in some places. José Pagés Madrigal argued that although the decision-makers in Egypt and other neighboring countries agree that governance models must be changed, excessive bureaucratization still hinders such transformations. Considering this, he suggested that the problem is political and strategic (rather than one of willingness) and that solving it will require historical path dependencies to be taken into account.

Another important factor to take into account, warned Carlo Alberini, is the practice of mindlessly importing governance models from one context into another. In his experience, the relationships between governance, local politics, and cultural habits are usually much different in the Southern and Northern Mediterranean, which will demand that local stakeholders adopt common visions, but ultimately reshape them to find more context-sensitive solutions.

Lucija Ažman Momirski reminded the group, moreover, that governance in the Northern Mediterranean is not without problems. In regions such as the Northern Adriatic, where competition among ports, as well as different economic sectors and disciplines, is very severe, the mode of operation is focused more on setting obstacles, rather than finding solutions that would benefit all. This creates a state of perpetual tension that can have direct consequences on spatial development, provision of public

infrastructure, and the everyday lives of local communities in the proximity of the port.

The discussion on port city governance was summarized by Carola Hein, who recalled that revitalizing historical links across the shared waters, such as the Mediterranean Sea, can strengthen their capacity to address future challenges. She stressed that port authorities currently promote the ideas of cooperation and sustainable development actively. To make the most out of this, it is becoming increasingly important to not only share knowledge and discuss possible solutions within academia, but also develop policy proposals that could influence key stakeholders who are becoming more receptive to new practices of co-creation. To increase our capacity to work collaboratively, we need platforms such as the Agora networks and initiatives such as the UFM Action plan, to connect research disciplines, link academia and practice, and work across multiple scales.

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