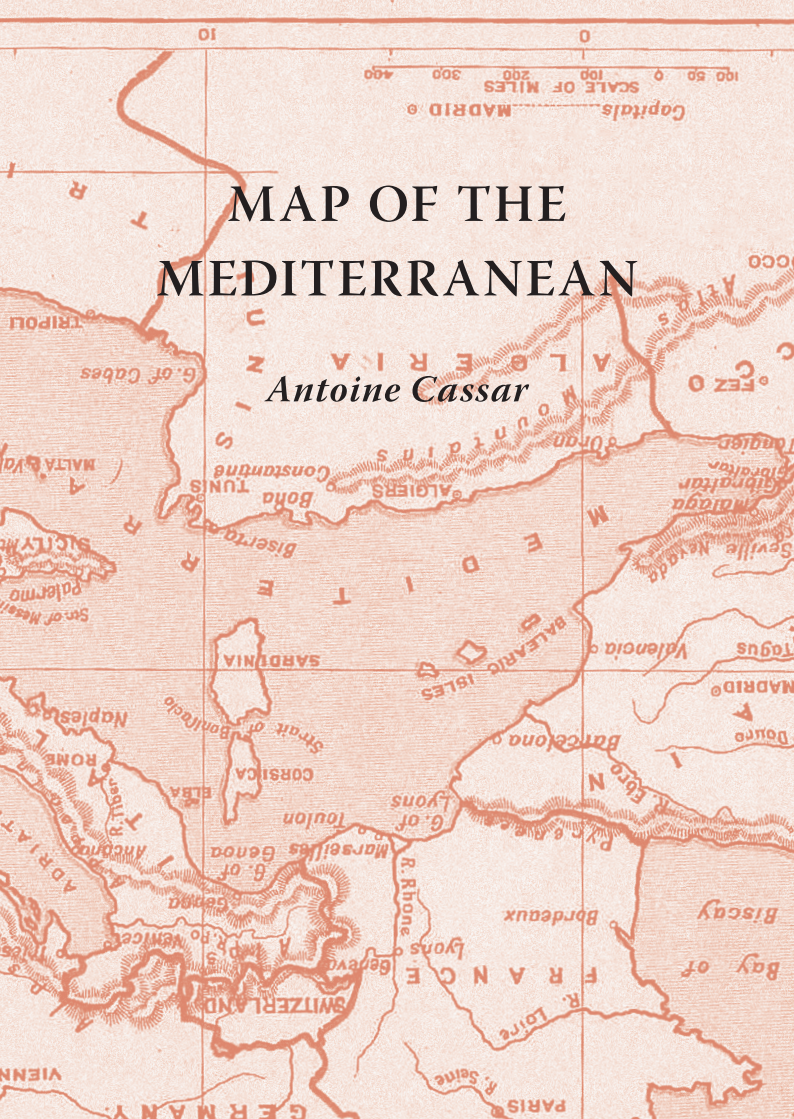


# MAP OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

*Antoine Cassar*

Mappa tal-Mediterran © Antoine Cassar 2013
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As the thousand sharp-horned bull
raised his chin slightly
off the shoulder
of the carrier of the heavens,
from the Atlantic, the first wave
scratched at the rock
with its salty claws,
with the second, from one crack and another
the foam slipped through,
the ferruginous pochard was already there
with the scoop of her beak at the ready,
with the third, a gentle knock, silence,
on the face of the limestone wall
drop by drop the cracking
etched a shimmering web,
until with a pull of the scythe
of the moon, a groan from the depths,
and with the force of half an ocean
the doors of the sea burst open.

The largest cascade
that no one has ever seen,
wave upon
wave, steam
into steam, from Gibraltar
to Gaza the ancient
salt lakes
welcomed the brine with a fizz,
each day enough to swallow
a nest, a pygmy elephant,
a laurel wood, an oasis,
a cave, a desert, a volcano.
A new sea stretching out
rising up to splatter
and caress
the bull's neck, the Etruscan thigh,
the face of the young boy at Carthage
staring from the cliff edge
at the peaks shrinking into islands,
the fingers of Pelops
splashing in the pebbles,
the cheeks of the mare dashing
like a shot out of Anatolia.






Al-Bahr al-Abyad al-Mutawassit,
Mare Nostrum, Mesogeios,
Akdeniz, Hayyam Hattikhon,
names upon names rinsed
and washed out
down to the deepest crevice of speech.
Between them the water trickles,
the foam slips along
the cuneiform wedges,
flows around the bulging consonants,
coral grows from their tips,
through the loops swim the ray
with its jutted spine, the Cretan
barracuda, a coralline saddled
bream, the bluefin tuna
dodging the sting of the trident.

The Middle Sea, depending from where you look,
from which direction the wind blows.
A mitochondrial sheet
wrinkling and smoothening out,
after each collapse of a cliff,
after each shudder from the depths,
it remains always newly
and wholly weaved.
Once the pochard had quenched her thirst,
the feathers on her back ruffled with a fright,
startled by the splashing laughter
of a pack of children
playing ducks and drakes
amid the chinking marbles of the Aegean.





In the southern wind, in the broad shadow
of the tousled olive tree,
a reclined foetus,
his head resting on the sandy
pillow of the Sinai,
between Morocco and Andalusia
the tips of his feet twist
tiny whirlpools,
from the stretched out
cord, he drinks the patient whiteness
of the still-rising Alps.
Drowsing away
in the blue of the womb,
at Corfu, a seahorse
tickles at his tummy
with its miniature tail.



Wind from the east.
A barefoot grandmother, with a blue gown
and a hamper hanging
from the top of her arm,
in the furrows of new fields
eight by eight she sprinkles
the seeds of the manna
of Mesopotamia and beyond:
flax and barley, emmer and
einkorn wheat, chickpeas
and peas, lentils and bitter vetch.
Watch out, nann! As you walk
along the lands
of the fertile crescent,
be careful not to leave
a severed toe behind.





After the harvest,
all stomachs and hearts content,
the ancestral grandmother was forgotten
and the prophet emerged in her place.
With a pointed cap, a sharpened
beard, his eyebrows
raised and his fingers
curved into a hook,
ardent, with fervour,
he foretells the good news
with his tongue of lava.
In the bundle on his back,
three books, each
thicker than the next, weighing down
the step of his short legs
over the holy land.

Wind from the north, solidly blowing
into the square sail
of the craft from Knossos.
A xebec heaving with oil,
with saffron, with zinc,
docking into Egypt, docking into Canaan,
from market to market
unloading its merchandise
in exchange for ingots of copper.
On the way back, with the long cauldron
simmering on the stern,
the bow cuts at the air,
sketching a new horizon of bronze
that does not rust,
until another cauldron, the volcano
of Thera suddenly erupted,
the horizon rose as one wave, a scalding tongue,
and the craft of Minos
was scraped and flung like a spit
into the ash below the palace.





Suns and moons sprouted
and drowned, the Mediterranean lit up
and darkened for three and a half
millennia, shining
and dimming, shining
and dimming, as if under the bars
of a cage spinning in the immense.
Zigzagging between the bars,
from light to shade, from shade to light,
weaving the meshes knot by knot
with their oily wake,
vessels of all sizes, all shapes,
in all directions, with all sorts
and qualities of merchandise
this side of the stars.
From Tangiers, from Tunis, from Tripoli,
a new merchandise, cheaper than uranium,
cheaper than oil, cheaper than gas,
a new merchandise, rising alone
from beneath the tempestuous carpets of sand,
a new merchandise, selling unassisted,
no advertising needed,
a new merchandise, that walks and talks.











A boat with a crushed cabin, a coughing
motor, the rudder detached,
with a new merchandise that walks
and talks, four hundred pairs of legs
crouched like owls, four hundred pairs of lips
parched and cut up
in the spray.
A worm-eaten boat, between sky and sea,
between awake and asleep, between moving
and still, riding the hopes that rise
and fall with the waves,
pegging onto the horizon
with each leap of the bow
another promise to those back home,
another prayer to the gods.





Horizon after horizon after horizon
the dreamed beach
appears and sinks in the darkness
of the squinting pupils,
yes and no, yes
and no, and again
no, and again
yes, until between Scylla and Charybdis
the boat, merchandise and all,
strikes the dentition of an outcrop
denting the keel,
strikes the canines of an outcrop
cracking the hull,
strikes the molars of an outcrop
tearing the deck,
and among the gaping mouths,
the deck of the boat pulled up
like the lid of a tin of sardines.

At the back of the deck, a young boy
face down, tasting the belly of the sea
for the first time,
stretching out an arm
for something to grab onto -
he can't reach the extended hand
of the maid of Ithaca,
he can't reach the unthreading rope
at Italy's end,
too far the triangle net of Istria,
too far the fish of Venice,
too far the neck of the stork
diving for the fish.
Blow, wind, on the hard-headed sea,
blow onto the waves to rub the earthen lamp!





Wind from the west. A whirlwind
from the ocean blows into the spout,
from beneath the lid of the lamp
jolts, climbs,
grapples to hatch
the blue-caped genie.
With the tuft of his beard ruffled,
struggling, he can't slip out totally,
neither safe nor sound,
his belly stuck inside,
and with it one of his arms.
On his head, a scarlet fez,
still reddening on both sides,
behind him, the tassel flutters
between the pyramids,
the threads brushing
for the hidden sources of the Nile.

Weak, poorly, too battered
to grant a wish,
let alone three, let
alone one wish for each continent,
let alone for the boats
caught on the currents in between.
With the fingers of Pelops at his neck,
with his tongue pulled back,
his eye is a single tear
that won't quite fall -
even if he had the strength,
he has no right
to bring the dead back to life,
and neither to scatter
the salt of love
in the hearts of the living.



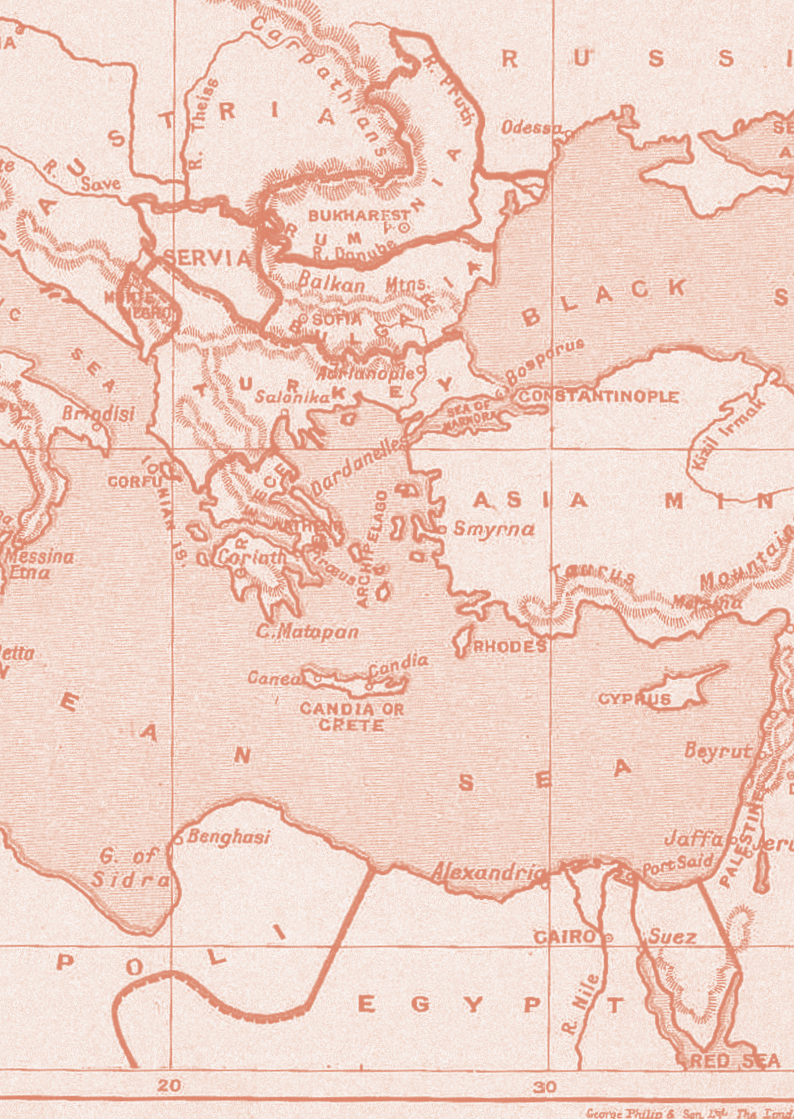


Back in the southern wind, peacefully,
patiently, sinking
lazily, sinking
into an indigo sleep,
a shrivelled, tucked-up corpse,
on his way to the open arms
of his awaiting kindred.
As he softly touches down,
he lies in foetal position.
As he tastes the ancient salts,
in the hollow behind his knee
the seabed crustaceans have already arrived,
along the arch of his calf
the zooplankton comes to rest.

Rising from amid the coral,
the young boy's breath, an azure bird,
stretches out his wings
and rows up toward the white of the light
to melt back into the wind.
As he reaches the twines of the rays,
his feathers braid into the meshes.
From Gaza to Gibraltar,
there the bird remained,
crucified to the foam,
his wings marked with spots,
face up, tail burning,
the heel of Europe
sinking into his long beak.
Floating under the net,
from light to shade, from shade to light,
with the subtle taste of olives
dripping from his craw,
on his belly, a tiny saddled bream
grates against his feathers, half-dizzy,
chewing at a knot of the mesh.



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