



Disputatio 2014: The Mediterranean, bridge of cultures

Science as a Mediterranean bridge

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Abstract

I suggest that science be seen as an important and vital bridge between Mediterranean and European values, and I begin by considering some striking features of the geological evolution of the Mediterranean. How did Tethys, the daughter of Uranus and Gaia and an aquatic sea-goddess, evolve into the Mediterranean? What caused the closing of the Mediterranean and its subsequent filling up with Atlantic waters through the Strait of Gibraltar? Science was born along the Mediterranean (this does not deny the major contributions of other regions and cultures including China, Islam, and many other parts of the world). The exchange of ideas, through travel and commerce, encouraged Mediterranean civilisations to recognise that nature could be understood in itself, and not merely by listening to the gods. This led to the establishment of philosophy around the VI century B.C. and the first steps towards European values. The Mediterranean approach was decisive because it opened the road to intellectual challenges, and the idea of progress that has been crucial and has shown us the way towards the development and the democratisation of knowledge. But progress is never easy. From Greek times, take Socrates who was accused and condemned for his alleged lack of respect for the gods and for supposedly corrupting his followers. After decades of intense research, we have acquired considerable knowledge about the present state of the Mediterranean Sea and its large number of serious problems: pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, decreasing flux of sediments, just to mention a few. These problems are not due to the nature or origin of the Mediterranean. They were caused by human intervention. We need science not only to identify these problems but also to solve them. Science is absolutely necessary to sustain the Mediterranean area and ensure that it will remain sustainable. In order to achieve sustainability, however, we have to promote a closer dialogue between science and the humanities. We still badly need the “agora”, for only shared scientific and humanistic knowledge can allow us to move towards a really integrated view of the Mediterranean. Science is the bridge that economic and political considerations should take. But science requires research, and research must be responsible. This calls for a joint effort from the scientific and humanistic communities but also, and this is extremely important, from society at large. We must address the major challenges of our time. The European values, which the *Academia Europaea* continues to defend and promote, are an incentive towards responsible research. We must consolidate the science bridge, and I am confident that we shall.