

# THE AGRICULTURAL HISTORY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

The Mediterranean has been both a trading arena and a region of much-coveted prizes. It has been the scene of the accumulation and confrontation of knowledge and the region where the religions of the Bible emerged and coexisted for long periods, but it has also been the theatre of recurrent violence from time immemorial. Greece, Rome, the Crusades, the Arabs, the Ottomans and, more recently, the European powers (France, Britain and Russia) made this basin a strategic zone of influence and rivalry before it became established as a key geopolitical area during Cold War. Agriculture in the region has benefited from many trends that have promoted trade, but in the course of history it has also found itself at the hub of power strategies and the development of international relations – sometimes to its cost.

## A FOCUS OF AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Crop and animal farming originated in the east of the basin, in the fertile Crescent, in the course of the long Neolithic revolution, which brought the transition from predation to production. Cereals and pulses (such as lentils and chick peas) were grown there and several animal species (goats, sheep, cattle and pigs) were domesticated from 10,000 B.C. onwards. To meet the needs of a growing population the people of the region – primarily the Sumerians – invented irrigation techniques that were designed in particular to harness water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers by building supply channels. It was also in this region that certain food techniques, such as bread-making, emerged. Agriculture and irrigation enabled human communities to cluster in city-states and were thus the vectors of civilisation in this part of the world. That agricultural society subsequently disseminated knowledge and several of the domesticated

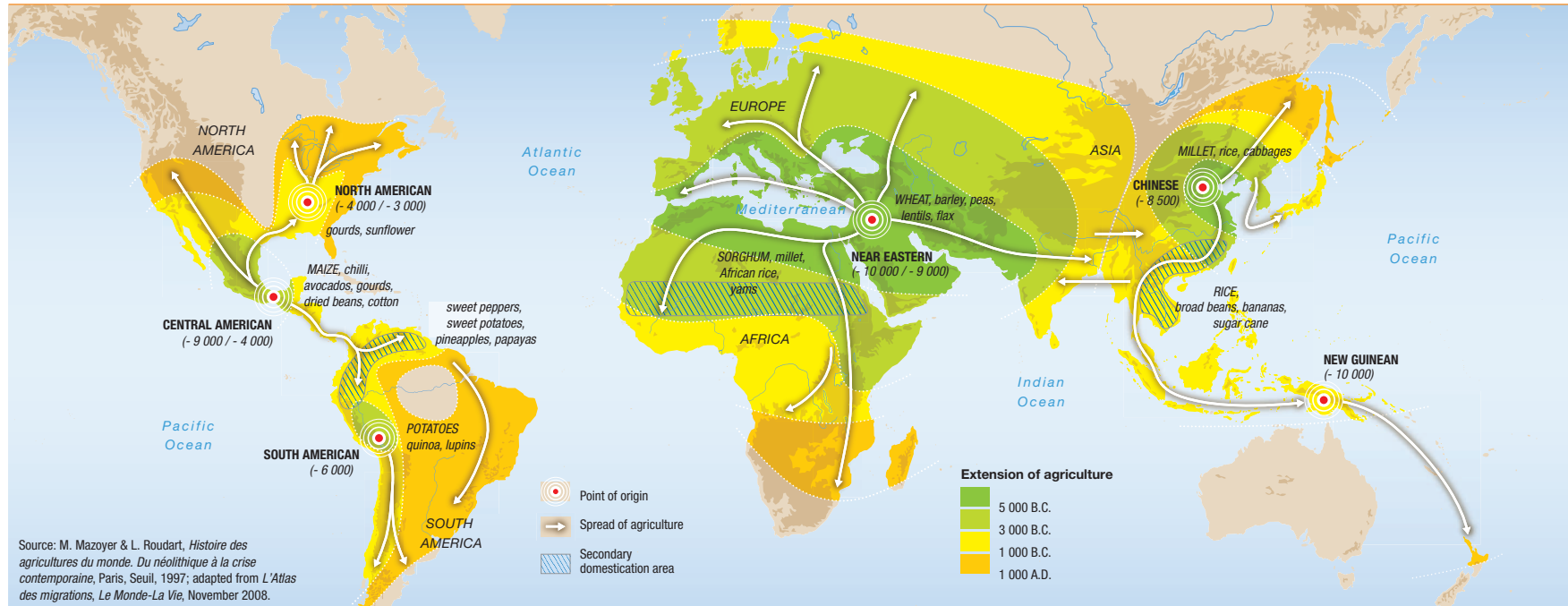
THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE 2<sup>ND</sup> CENTURY: MARE NOSTRUM



species to Europe and Egypt, in particular, where flood-recession crop-growing based on appropriate techniques for using Nile water enabled the influence of the Pharaohs to spread far and wide. The science of agronomy, which had begun in Mesopotamia and flourished in Egypt, was further developed by the Greeks and the Romans. Indeed it is interesting to observe a sort of lineage in this discipline, where the Latin agronomists (Cato,

Varro, Palladius and Columella) drew on the work of their predecessors and developed what Louis Malassis refers to as “Mediterranean agronomic thought”, which later spread to Andalusia, the new interface of Arab and European peoples. The Andalusian school, which was related to the great tradition of Mediterranean agronomists led by the Nabateans, actually adapted the crops they imported mainly from Asia – cotton, rice, eggplants, asparagus, chicory, sugar cane,

## SPREAD OF AGRICULTURE



and indigo plant. This school, which laid great emphasis on landscape refinement, also developed the art of creating gardens, which were embellished with jasmine and roses from the Orient. During the Caliphate of Cordoba (756-1031) the Al Andalus water engineers, most of whom were Arab, improved water mobilisation techniques, achieving such a degree of sophistication that they became the great masters in the field.

It should be underlined that these technological inputs were generally handed down or imposed as the result of conquests. The discovery of the Americas with its corollary of violence brought the introduction of maize and potatoes, for instance, to the Mediterranean, and the French agronomists, who were known as the “North African agronomists”, made the Mediterranean region a new field of investigation during the colonial period.

**DEVELOPMENT MARKED BY CONQUESTS**

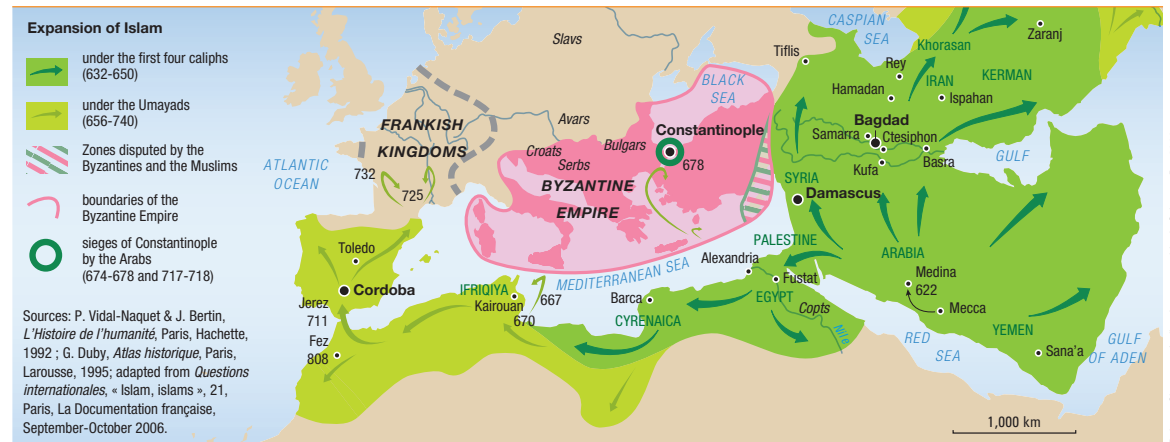
Access to agricultural commodities is gained through trade and/or land appropriation, a fact that is the crux of Mediterranean history. After the Phoenicians founded Carthage, the Greeks resorted to conquering land that ensured the cities of Attica a certain degree of food security. Indeed, when Athens lost control of the sea in the 4th century, a law was introduced banning wheat exports on pain

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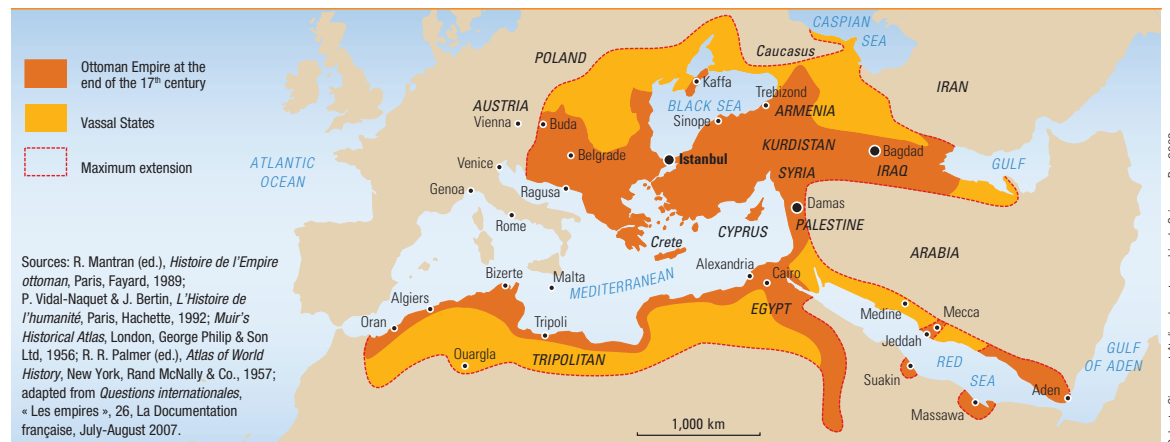
of death. That security was again assured, temporarily, by Alexander the Great, who succeeded in controlling the fertile lands of Babylonia and Egypt, from which he imported cereals. But it was Rome that made the Mediterranean its famous *Mare Nostrum*, in other words, its transaction arena: ports that were linked to waterways and roads penetrating into the hinterland made it possible to drain off the countries' agricultural riches by water and by caravan. Rome's domination over the entire Mediterranean area marked an era when certain crops spread widely. Vine and olives were grown by the colonists in the newly conquered territories, and the market value of these commodities made them a significant means of trade. Furthermore, in order to ensure food security, the Romans imposed the development of wheat, particularly in Asia Minor (Turkey) and Andalusia, in the Lebanese region of Bekaa and in Greece. Many Roman peasants, however, unable to cope with the competition from other realms of the empire, went bankrupt and were plunged into slavery, often working on vast farm estates (*latifundia*) that were set up by rich merchants. This agrarian situation inevitably had political effects – slave revolts multiplied –, and the Gracchus brothers attempted to introduce agrarian reforms from around 130 A.D. onwards.

The Arab conquests achieved in Spain and in the southern and eastern Mediterranean from the 7th to the beginning of the 8th century were also a means of controlling agricultural land; in this new “hub and spoke” setup, only the centre changed: after flowing to Rome and Byzantium, Egyptian wheat was transported to Medina, Damascus and Bagdad. It was during this Arab domination, which was contested by Byzantium, that the maritime republics of Italy (Venice, Pisa and Genoa) built up a vast trading

### BIRTH AND EXPANSION OF ISLAM



### THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE OTTOMAN IN THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY



network in the Mediterranean, essentially from the 10th to the 13th century. Italian ships were thus used for the bulk of the traffic from Al-Andalus and the Maghreb to Syria and Egypt. Similarly, Byzantium granted port concessions to *La Serenissima* from the 10th century onwards, before the emperors began to favour Genoa and Pisa in the 12th century in order to escape the Venetian stranglehold.

Then in the 16th century, it was the Ottomans who controlled a large part of the Mediterranean basin. Trading was intense, particularly since Istanbul had granted France the use of the famous Ports of Levant (in the Near East) and trading posts on the Barbary Coast (North Africa). These ports of call consisted of the ports and cities of the Empire (Sidon, Alexandria, Aleppo, etc.) and were a means of establishing a division of labour, so to speak, within the regions that were linked through the same trading network. In addition to developing trade, the Ottoman Empire also influenced culinary practices, and it was furthermore the originator of demesne ownership in the Near East, of which contemporary political history still bears the mark today. As the Empire gradually weakened in the 19th century, the Mediterranean basin became a much-coveted prize for the European powers, which strove to control the maritime traffic routes and also to obtain land. This was the case in the Maghreb, where the French conquest was coupled with the intensive colonisation of certain regions. The numerous French farmers who settled in Algeria farmed the land and gradually built up a colonial domain of modern agriculture in the coastal and in-shore regions, whereas traditional farming methods were concentrated in the mountains and in the dry, less fertile highland plains. The creation of a so-called modern sector alongside the traditional farming

communities had considerable repercussions on agrarian and political developments: after Algerian independence in 1962, the colonists' land was converted into collectivist structures before being privatised in 1980.

### LIVING EVIDENCE OF HISTORY

Agriculture was a major contributing factor in Mediterranean civilisation, giving rise to the region's renowned knowledge of agronomy and hydraulics. Since this knowledge was accumulated and shared, it was central to agricultural progress in the region before being projected throughout the world, as was the case with olive-growing and vine-growing. But history still weighs heavily on agrarian realities in the Mediterranean countries. The agrarian question is still a salient issue of debate in Spain, at least in Andalusia, where the *Reconquista* gave rise to uneven land distribution. This is also the case in Syria, Palestine and Lebanon, where the Ottomans' distribution of land bribes to influential families left marks that are still felt today. The Mediterranean has often been more an arena of rivalry than of sharing. The ideal vision of a common past is doubtless not the most apt approach for founding a common future. Yet Mediterranean trade was so intense that the region was the scene of encounter and even intermingling of the peoples on the Mediterranean shores. Certain cultural codes – such as culinary traditions and, in particular, the Cretan diet – have been disseminated throughout the region and indeed throughout the world. This trade has always been of advantage to the States that border on the Mediterranean, but unless it is now organised it is liable to prove disastrous for many of the actors involved. Since the States are now independent, the time has come for trade cooperation. ■

## AGRICULTURAL STRUCTURES IN ALGERIA

The colonial demesnes occupied 40% of Algerian farm-land – and some of the most fertile land in the country. In 1954, approximately 3 million hectares of the agricultural area in use were still colonial properties. This colonial land was subsequently transformed into self-managed demesnes and cooperatives before becoming large State-run agricultural demesnes again in 1982. In 1987, the government divided these demesnes into smaller, more autonomous units – collective farms with private status, so to speak. The status of these farms, where private technical capital is combined with State-owned land, could develop in the future.

