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Circle(s) and Circulation(s) as Constitutive of the Black Sea (World)

From there [the Thracian Bosphorus] begins its vast Pontic gulf, with the marshes of Maeotis (i.e. the Sea of Azov) at its furthest point. This sea has fresher water than the others because of the great number of rivers, and is foggy and rather shallow. Accordingly it is called *Pontus* (i.e. the Black Sea), because it is traversable (cf. pons. gen. *pontis* 'bridge') and for that reason it supports seals, tuna and dolphins, but no larger sea-creatures.¹

1 Introduction

Isidore of Seville, writing in early seventh century, approached the Black Sea from the other end of the Mediterranean, and had no difficulty in describing it as the outermost extreme, and as a somewhat different, though human-friendly, "nature preserve." Although he narrated it as if he were traveling by boat, he depended for his account on ancient works and hearsay. He differentiated the Black Sea from the Mediterranean as well as the Sea of Azov, suggesting a progression in stages from the south, mirroring a similar shorter one from the north. The Sea of Azov was to the Black Sea what the Black Sea was to the Mediterranean.

Braudel's depiction of the Black Sea reminds us of Isidore: "The far-off Black Sea, limit of Mediterranean shipping, was ringed round by wild lands, with a few exceptions, both un-civilized and de-civilized."² The Black Sea is "far-off" and associated with a "limit." It is nevertheless a mere extension—by its function in relation to Mediterranean shipping. This characterization has been influential for all subsequent literature. The four dissenters from this dominant view who treat the Black Sea as a sea in its own right are the interwar Romanian historian Gheorghe Brătianu,³ myself,⁴ Owen

1 *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. and intro. Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 277.

2 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (London: Collin, 1976), 110.

3 George [Gheorghe] I. Brătianu, *La Mer Noire des origines à la conquête ottomane* (Rome: Societas Academica Dacoromana, 1969).

4 I was inspired, after years of working on the Mediterranean, by the journal *Il Mar Nero*, the result of international cooperation with a focus on the Black Sea, the first issue of which had come out in 1994, the year before I had access to Brătianu's then rarely available book in the library of the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme*, Paris. For a more detailed exposition of my theoretical and historical viewpoint, see Eyüp Özveren, "A Framework for the Study of the Black Sea World, 1789–1915," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 20, no. 1 (1997): 77–113; and "Black Sea World as a Unit of Analysis," in *Politics of the Black Sea*, ed. Tunç Aybak (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 61–84.

Doonan,⁵ a Black Sea archaeologist, and Cyprian Broodbank, the author of a contribution as important as that of Braudel but with a different temporal focus, who addressed the issue head on under the heading “Mediterranean centres and edges”:

Should the Black Sea be included, another, 461,000 sq. km (178,000 sq. miles) connected via the slender Bosphorus and Dardanelles? Plato, writing when Greek towns ringed its shores, certainly thought so. But although a close neighbour, and far more than the Mediterranean’s backyard, the Black Sea has a notably more equable, continental environment, a totally contrastive maritime aspect (it is effectively islandless, for a start) and partly as a result, a different early history from the larger basin.⁶

Unlike the formative phase of oceans in the “deep time” of geologists, the Black Sea was connected with the Mediterranean, not in pre-human history but in the prehistory of a more recent vintage, ca. 5,500 BC. Hence the unification of the two seas was a catastrophic event witnessed by humans in the vicinity of the Black Sea as their settlements along the littoral were inundated and their means of procuring livelihood as well as their basic food patterns were altered.⁷

In the following section we first place the Black Sea in a comparative perspective. We then specify its shape before we delineate the mechanism that supports it, before proceeding with a series of close-ups on select subjects and objects involved in circulation, only to relate them in order of importance as constitutive of a complex yet specific dynamics.

2 What is the Black Sea Like?

A distinction is maintained here between “the Black Sea” and “the Black Sea world.” We must first address what the Black Sea is. Is the Black Sea a mere extension, an outgrowth, a periphery, no different than the other inner seas of the Mediterranean, as noted by Fernand Braudel? Putting the Black Sea in comparative perspective serves to support the case for its independent treatment. The Black Sea covers 183,000 square miles, while the Mediterranean is 960,000 square miles; the Black Sea is, then, about a fifth the size of the Mediterranean. The Tyrrhenian and the Ionian (subseas of the Mediterranean) are much larger than the Black Sea. In juxtaposition, the Ligurian and Adriatic subseas, as well as the Sea of Marmara, are much smaller. Finally, the Aegean Sea, where it all began according to textbooks on the history of Western civilization, a

5 Owen P. Doonan, “The Corrupting Sea and the Hospitable Sea: Some Early Thoughts Toward a Regional History of the Black Sea,” in *KOINE: Mediterranean Studies in Honor of R. Ross Holloway*, ed. Derek B. Counts and Anthony S. Tuck (Providence: Joukovsky Institute of Archaeology Publications Series, 2010), 68–74.

6 Cyprian Broodbank, *The Making of the Middle Sea: A History of the Mediterranean from the Beginning to the Emergence of the Classical World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55.

7 Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14–15.

sea of innumerable islands that facilitated the diffusion of peoples, goods, technologies, ideas, and religions, is surprisingly small, all the more so when the accomplishment registered on its behalf is reconsidered. It is less than half the size of the Black Sea. In short, the Black Sea is larger by a considerable margin than several subseas of the Mediterranean. Then there are the enclosed seas in the vicinity of the Black Sea that await comparison. The Caspian, with its 170,000 square miles, is only slightly smaller than the Black Sea. The Aral Sea, considerably shrunk due to environmental destruction since the 1960s, was even then only 26,500 square miles.⁸

The Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Aral Sea are descendants of a once much greater pre-human prehistoric sea that encompassed them. Whereas the Mediterranean is a relic of the ancient Tethys Sea, the Black Sea and its associates have their origin in the Paratethys Sea. When thus approached as a set of remnant seas, along with the legendary Pannonian Sea (of which the Lake Balaton in Hungary survives), both the total area and the size conveyed by the standard maps become comparable to that of the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, the Greater Black Sea is approximately the same size as what the ancients called the Great Sea. We indulge in a mental exercise here—but not a farfetched stretch of the imagination—since the term “*région pontico-pannonienne*”⁹ inspired by zoologists has already expressed it, albeit in a narrower sense. With this receding horizon in space/time as a backdrop, one is more tempted to treat the Black Sea as an entity in its own right.¹⁰

We now need to identify this entity as part of a specific world. The Black Sea world is larger than the Black Sea that occupies its center of gravity. The Black Sea world is defined in relation to the centrality of the Black Sea. The convergence between the two is highest where the sea is. As we move inland from the littoral, the divergence starts to irritate the observer as the maritime influence becomes less marked, introducing the question of boundaries. It is best to think of this space as a set of graded and distorted concentric circles. Beyond the Black Sea world, there are other meso-level worlds. In graded zones, two or more worlds overlap. The Black Sea world overlaps in part with the Mediterranean world, the Balkans, Eurasia, and the Danubian world extending into *Mitteleuropa* as expounded in the *Danube* of Magris, the contemporary writer known for exploiting the possibilities of the boundary between fiction and documentary. Drawing the boundary between two seas being difficult as it is, demarcating two worlds is next to impossible, given shifting porous boundaries that defy linear representation.

Seas have other attributes than size, such as salinity, depth, natural resources, currents, winds, whether they have islands or not, principal ports and various aspects of

⁸ For further details, see Élisabeth Dumont-Le Cornec, *Les mers mythiques* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2010).

⁹ Claudio Magris, *Danube* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 221.

¹⁰ I benefitted greatly to see that some of my insightful inferences were shared by natural scientists in the Second International Conference on the “Oceanography of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea: Similarities and Differences of Two Interconnected Basins,” Institute of Marine Sciences, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, October 14–18, 2002.

the coastline, rivers that flow into them, and climates along with the seasonal variations they impose upon the environment. The Black Sea has a salinity of 18 percent, whereas the Sea of Marmara to which it joins by the Bosphorus, 36, and the Aegean 37–39 percent. This criterion alone can help us draw the border of the Black Sea at the Bosphorus. Moreover, the Black Sea climate is characterized as “temperate,” that of Marmara as “Mediterranean”: further supporting evidence for the above choice of boundary. Finally, the Black Sea, unlike the Mediterranean, receives more than sufficient rainfall on a regular basis. This makes regions more self-reliant economically. Whereas Mediterranean regions, in a constant state of unstable equilibrium, are forced to look outwards to make up for their periodic food shortages, their Black Sea counterparts could afford to remain introverted.

A distinguishing feature of the Black Sea is its wealth of rivers. The best known is the highly internationalized Danube, from its origins turning its back to Europe to join the Black Sea.¹¹ The Dnipro (also known as Dnieper), and the Don enrich the Black Sea, but have also polluted it badly since the last quarter of the twentieth century. The smaller Caspian Sea receives the disproportionately significant Volga and the Ural. Altogether, the Black Sea has some fifty medium-length and thirteen long rivers.¹² In this respect, compared with the Mediterranean, the Black Sea world remains unmatched. It is not only the replenishment of water the rivers provide, but also the vastly expanded economic “catchment area” penetrating deep into the hinterland that makes all the difference. Hence when approached as the Black Sea plus its riverine networks, the Black Sea becomes even more comparable with the Mediterranean.

3 The Circle, When the Center Can Hold, or Otherwise

Today we tend all too easily to forget that, before modern aviation, it was impossible for humans to experience a bird’s eye view of the Black Sea. Even so, the ancients were, by inference from piecemeal evidence, aware that the Black Sea resembled a Scythian bow with its grip at the *Palus Maeotis* (the Sea of Azov) and its string coinciding with the southern shore of the Sea of Pontus (that is, the Black Sea).¹³ The maps we know came much later, on the eve of modernity. Those drawn with sailing ships in mind are quite different from those that take steamships for granted. Whereas the former emphasize the trajectories suggested by the directions favored by winds and currents and go into greater detail along these routes, the latter take abstract geometrical properties, such as the straight line between two points representing the shortest distance, into foremost consideration. In the former, the shortest distance between two points can

11 Paul Morand, *Entre Rhin et Danube* (Paris: Nicolas Chaudun, 2011), 123–24.

12 Refik Baskın, *Hey Gidi Karadeniz* (Istanbul: Yitik Ülke, 2017), 23.

13 Adem Işık, *Antik Kaynaklarda Karadeniz Bölgesi* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2001), 3.

be ignored because it is not practically navigable, whereas in the latter it becomes the most pertinent route to detail. After the Crimean War (1853–56), which introduced an internationally sanctioned law of the sea with a corresponding regulatory regime to the increasingly multipolar Black Sea, the necessity of exploratory scientific expeditions for the sake of modern mapmaking induced Russians and Ottomans to work together; as when in 1860 Colonel Hacı Ahmed Vesim of the Ottoman Navy was assigned the task of drawing the map of the Black Sea coastline in collaboration with the Russian Admiral Podukov [*sic*].¹⁴

The very shape of the Black Sea brings to mind a distorted form that resembles first and foremost a circle. There is something archetypal about the circle. Out of it can be generated a whole series of geometric forms, including the square. Symmetry has always attracted as much attention, as it is a property of both, even more of the circle than of the square. By looking at the shape of seas as represented in maps, we can single out the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the latter more so than the former, as displaying a strong symmetry along the north–south as well as the east–west axis. There was an even greater degree of symmetry before the Black Sea was joined with the Mediterranean—that is, when the Sea of Marmara still remained a lake connected to the Black Sea with a river,¹⁵ hence mirroring the Sea of Azov. Alternatively, the Black Sea, with respect to the Mediterranean, and the Sea of Azov, in relation to the Black Sea, are like successive phases of an optical illusion moving in a hall of mirrors. The Straits in the south are also mirrored disproportionately in the Strait of Kerch, not surprisingly also known as the Cimmerian, as distinct from the Thracian, Bosphorus in the north,¹⁶ controlling the entrance to the Sea of Azov. Moreover, the alignment of ports around the circumference of the Black Sea raises a symmetric pattern to new heights. The archetypal shape of the Black Sea hence seems to have developed over time into a quadrilateral, and more specifically a trapezoidal. Corners and straight lines have been worn out in a transformation that owes as much to geology as to the advances in mapmaking. In this elongated process, curvilinearity has become more pronounced and, for a contemporary observer with a penchant for abstraction, it would not be farfetched to imagine the original form as a circle that deformed into an ellipse as perceived by the ancients.

What concerns us here is the etymological connections between “circle,” the noun, “circular,” the adjective, and “to circulate,” the verb, which lead us to yet another noun, “circulation.” We should note in passing the formal affinity between the circle and the

¹⁴ İdris Bostan, *İstanbul'un 100 Denizcisi* (Istanbul: IBB Kültür A.Ş. Yayınları, 2014), 235. We have not been able to track down this name. Deciphering foreign names in Ottoman script involves guesswork and the source cited here may involve a misreading of the original document. It is highly likely that we are faced here with a member of the famous Butakov dynasty of Imperial Russian naval commanders. Admiral Grigorii Ivanovich Butakov (1820–82) is the most plausible candidate given his term of service (1856–60) and his innovative record in general, and his scientific credentials in particular.

¹⁵ Ali Pasiner, *İki Denizin Suları* (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 2001), 13.

¹⁶ King, *The Black Sea*, 16.

sphere, the latter being a tridimensional projection of the former. It is worth recalling that Eratosthenes, the polymath librarian of Alexandria, believed that the world was spherical, and thereby contradicted the commonly held conviction that it was flat. If we conventionally speak of spheres of circulation, it is because the sphere by its very nature imposes a circular form as well as a cycle—associated with rotation or revolution—and facilitates travel, transfer, transmission, and ultimately circulation at large. Time itself moves literally in a cycle on the surface of the clock. We relate this progression so strongly to the clock that we project from the clock to the world at large the very specification of clockwise or anticlockwise movement as two fundamental categories of classification where motion is concerned.

We spoke above of centricity and gravitation as responsible for holding the Black Sea in shape. As we approach towards the center, centripetal forces intensify whereas in the reverse direction centrifugal forces increasingly dominate. Centricity in the Black Sea was imposed twice from Constantinople/Istanbul. First, it was with the founding of the city under the Romans as an imperial capital (330 AD) overly dependent on overseas provisioning. The Roman Empire was the only political entity that established its sovereignty all around the Mediterranean and converted it to a “mare nostrum.” This was exceptional and provided its heirs with a model. The Eastern Roman Empire, inspired by Rome, also looked to the Mediterranean. As its power over the Mediterranean declined, the Black Sea escaped from its hold. Secondly, with the post-1453 conversion of the Black Sea into an “Ottoman lake,” non-Ottoman merchant shipping and trade was prohibited until the late eighteenth century.¹⁷ Even so, the Ottoman Empire was also Mediterranean-looking.¹⁸ In short, Black Sea was second-best as far as both empires were concerned. This was because it did not suffice to sustain an empire; though potentially rich, it was difficult to bring to its knees, the regular enforcement of law and order being comparatively costly given its Eurasian frontier across the steppes.¹⁹ Be that as it may, the above first attempt was unsuccessful but left its legacy, whereas the second was effective. In both instances, albeit to different degrees, economic organization favoring the capital city’s provisioning needs was imposed from above. Regional specialization took shape accordingly, with the deepening economic division of labor.

Each of the two instances of top-down domination was preceded and followed by a period when more spontaneous horizontal forces originating from multiple ports were

¹⁷ This was not as absolute as the literature suggests, at least until the Cossack raids started towards the end of sixteenth century. See Halil İnalcık, “The Question of the Closing of the Black Sea under the Ottomans,” *Archeion Pontou* 35 (1978): 108–10. In any case, it gave a stimulus to Ottoman local maritime traffic as well as land-based caravans.

¹⁸ So was the Russian Empire, as its advent toward the south changed the Black Sea as of the late eighteenth century.

¹⁹ The only empire to originate from within the Black Sea was the lesser Empire of Trebizond, and in terms of calling, function, scale and scope, it did not measure up to the model. Hence its record supports our argument.

allowed to negotiate a moveable center. This relatively more bottom-up alternative arrangement relied on a political multi-polarity of rival empires and states, caught in a singular economic division of labor, fostered by trade across the sea. There have been three historical examples of this mode of organization: (1) the Black Sea before and during the Ancient Greek colonization, (2) the penetration of Italian city-states into Black Sea trade via partnership with local powers, imperial and otherwise, and (3) the modern experience—albeit with a long Cold War interregnum more resembling the antithesis via bizonal application²⁰—by way of modern trade and shipping. Each of these three instances coincides with exogenous forces at work to incorporate the Black Sea into a greater (world) market and its corresponding international political economic regime. This comes at the cost of Istanbul's monopoly and reduces its role to that of a strategically located intermediary that is advantageously positioned but by no means unrivalled (by Trebizond, Caffa, Odesa, Constanța, Batumi, Varna, etc.). Either way, the periodically renegotiated centrality of the Black Sea is defined vis-à-vis the division of labor.

If the Black Sea world survives as a “meso-region,” it is because neither of the two rival arrangements has so far been able to eliminate its nemesis completely from the scene. If the first arrangement succeeded for good, it would imply a Black Sea world completely cut off and enclosed upon itself, whereas with the opposite, we would witness a complete disintegration and absorption of the Black Sea world into the global system. In between the two extremes, the Black Sea world survives as a meso-region, indicating that its center is still being sustained to a significant extent by the power originating from its own division (and integration)²¹ of labor, as well as its (spatially) circular and (temporally) cyclical mechanisms reinforcing centripetal forces in favor of preserving its unity.

Modern geology, paleontology, and oceanography contribute greatly to our claim that the Black Sea was originally cut off from the Mediterranean in much of its pre-human formative ages. The earliest Black Sea economy, which predated the ancient Greek colonization and which the colonizers themselves encountered, was also introverted and self-sufficient. Ancient colonizers entrenched themselves in a pre-existing network of connections only to reorient and consolidate the Black Sea economy to their benefit. The two opposite coasts along the east–west axis are further apart than those on the north–south axis (some 700 miles for the former and 160–400 miles for the latter) and their economic activities are similar. Hence it is understandable that the connection along this axis has always been weak. Even before the Greek colonization, locals traded along the north–south axis, connecting Asia Minor

²⁰ It was during the Soviet Empire that a highly exceptional maritime line was opened connecting Odesa with Batumi along the diagonal. This exception proves the rule of which more will be said below.

²¹ Division of labor alone would serve disintegration via accelerating centrifugal trends. Because division of labor is accompanied by a further round of “integration” that is either automatic through increasing trade or achieved socially through organization, cooperation, provisioning, or planning, the combined effect is reinforcement of the system.

with Crimea by the shortest route through the open sea. For much of history, major advances in Black Sea navigation, technological or institutional, contributed to the intensification of traffic along this line. It is not only physical proximity and facility that favored this outcome, but also the complementarity of economic activities at the two ends, as befitting a consolidation of division of labor in conformity with the expansion of trade. Institutional and historical factors also mattered; Sinope, an original beneficiary, yielded its place to Trebizond, just as Istanbul successfully overshadowed Trabzon as the southern destination. During the nineteenth century, Odesa rose as a major competitor to Istanbul by becoming the main northern port by a wide margin. The recent rise of Constanța (at the expense of Odesa, no longer serving as a port for Russia) and Batumi announces a new era insofar as both owe their fortunes not to the expansion of trade and travel between the two, but to their connections with the world at large.

It should be noted here that nothing like the spectacular “triangular trade”²² that nurtured British economic development ever emerged on the Black Sea. If it did, then there would have been a self-sustaining circular trade at work. The Black Sea trade with a focus on Istanbul could be interpreted as vaguely similar to the Amsterdam-centered Dutch trade in its Baltic preserve, to which the British reacted by building up their Atlantic “triangular trade” from the seventeenth century on. “Circular” trade being absent, “circular” navigation along the coastline remained the privilege of modern cruise ships, emerging as an offshoot of the European travel culture of the Grand Tour, the Orient Express, and the Danubian cruises, but had its final take with the popular Soviet cruise companies of the 1960s and 1970s, when they squared the Black Sea circle by transgressing the Iron Curtain with a stopover in Istanbul.

4 Circulation in the Black Sea as Constitutive of the Black Sea World

But what else circulates besides ships? Obviously, people(s), but also fauna and flora, merchandize, technologies, and skills, some of the more prominent being pottery-making, baking, shipbuilding, and seafaring. Those that do not circulate are as important as those that do. For example, when plants circulate, they help transform the landscape, as was the case with vines, citruses, and tea, which grow in milder or subtropical climate micro-regions, as well as those humans who make their living off them, as when Herodotus “recorded seeing Scythians high on hemp on the shores.”²³ When goods did

²² A three-legged trade whereby one pays for imports from one country with exports to another, as was the case with Britain (exporting manufactures and shipping services), West Africa (slaves), and the West Indies (sugar). This amounts to self-sustaining circular trade.

²³ Predrag Matvejevic, *Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 59.

not circulate, they brought either the needy to their feet directly, or their business-minded merchants. There exists a related set of documents in the Archives of the Chamber of Commerce of Marseille, including the correspondence of the Embassy in Istanbul;²⁴ the French were particularly interested in procuring strategic naval supplies from Kherson to their arsenal in Toulon during the closing decades of the eighteenth century.

The Black Sea world, at the crossroads of Eurasian routes and its southern connections, has attracted humans since time immemorial and incoming peoples moved, more often than not, anticlockwise. The Black Sea was relatively easy to approach through the vast steppes reaching the northern shore. This proved particularly useful for pastoralists who moved with their animals in need of pasture. Each new wave that arrived pushed the previous further. Those who had to surrender their lands under pressure sought refuge in more secure but less fertile places out of the way. There was a mechanism at work that periodically replenished and rejuvenated the population, which lost considerable numbers to the slave trade.²⁵ This lasted until the nineteenth century, when Russians could bring migratory movements under control. The Black Sea was attractive for (re-)settlement because it had many less accessible swamplands, river deltas, and mountainous regions in the vicinity of the sea, where a certain security could be enjoyed thanks to nature. Because borders were easily trespassed, there emerged the phenomenon of locally mobile border peoples who provided security for the larger states in return for enjoying *de facto* autonomy. Cossacks come to mind immediately, but there were others like Crimean Tatars with their khanate playing the buffer state between rival empires. These intermediaries would lose to expanding states in the long run.

Human circulation was not restricted to nomads. Circassians, inhabitants of highlands unaccustomed to the sea, who resisted Russian submission by armed struggle, were forced into exile in the Ottoman Empire, tens of thousands dying on the way in overcrowded boats. The more submissive Crimean Tatars had to migrate to Dobruja (Romania) or Sinop, the nearest friendly oversea destination, and spread into Anatolia.²⁶ The many human dramas occasioned by World War I only foreshadowed the human tragedies the more notorious World War II would bring about. However, there has always been voluntary migration too, be it permanent or temporary. For example, during the long nineteenth century, many Greeks moved from Istanbul to Odesa to set up businesses and did very well. Muslims from Trabzon, Rize, or Artvin on the

24 Chambre de Commerce de Marseille, Archives antérieures à 1801, "*Commerce avec la Mer Noire et la Géorgie*," Liasse, Série H Article no. 79, 1747–1787.

25 Slaves were regularly procured from the territories of nowadays Ukraine and accessible parts of Russia and the Caucasus. The numbers involved were spectacular. This pillage drained the region of its surplus population and even more. Slaves were either directed to the palace or put to work as domestics. They were gradually absorbed into Ottoman society and hence left no trace.

26 Paul Robert Magocsi, *This Blessed Land: Crimea and the Crimean Tatars* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

further end of the Turkish coast moved across the sea to the north, as well as to the east into Georgia, in search of making a living. Some of the best bakers in Turkey are now descendants of those who first started their trade in the southern territories of imperial Russia.

One final example serves as an ironical endnote: The Romanovs, aspiring to become the rulers of the “Third Rome,” sought hard to acquire Istanbul as late as World War I. As a corollary, the Black Sea would also become a Russian lake. This project failed miserably. With the Bolshevik Revolution, the *crème de la crème* of Russian society found themselves as refugees in Istanbul.²⁷ In 1919, a Russian writer appealed to British public opinion, via a letter to *The Times*, demanding that Istanbul should be given to these Russian refugees.²⁸ The Allies disagreed, but with Istanbul under their occupation, they entertained the idea of imposing an international regime on the city. They saw the advantage of holding in their hand both the gateway to the Black Sea and a resident Russian community refurbished by the demobilized White Army, as the sword of Damocles hanging over Soviet Russia. The most unimaginable candidate for forced exile, however, was yet to arrive within less than a decade. He was Leon Trotsky, commander of the Red Army. He spent some four years (1929–33) in Istanbul, mostly on one of the Princes’ Islands, where he demonstrated his fishing skills.²⁹

The Black Sea had first attracted Mediterranean fishermen on a seasonal basis because of its rich fisheries, presumably as early as before the Trojan War. We will nevertheless save this discussion for later. In contradistinction, what attracted the ancient colonizers was the prospect of grain cultivation and trade, in return for olive oil from the Mediterranean. With the closing of the Middle Ages, Italian city-states such as Genoa, Pisa, and Venice resuscitated the Black Sea trade because they could import food again, in return for their manufactures. This is the “*plaque tournante*” function to which Brătianu referred.³⁰ It bestowed upon the Black Sea an economic role of far-reaching significance. Afterwards, with the Black Sea an Ottoman lake, this picture was substantially modified. Because Istanbul’s population, extraordinary by European standards, required regular overseas provisioning of foodstuffs, the Danubian provinces were assigned to specialize in agriculture and animal husbandry. This they did very well until the Russian penetration. Even so, Black Sea trade continued to play a major role in Istanbul’s food provisioning as late as World War I.

With the rise of Russia, the composition of trade and regional specialization on the Black Sea were altered. The center of gravity of grain production shifted clockwise, with Odesa the major port for exports. It would move further east as the cultivated area and the marketable surplus expanded and made the region the breadbasket of the world. By the *fin-de-siècle*, it was evident to careful observers that oil exports

27 Svetlana Uturgauri, *Boğaz’daki Beyaz Ruslar: 1919–1929* (Istanbul: Tarihçi Kitabevi, 2015).

28 İ. Hakkı Sunata, *İstanbul’da İşgal Yılları* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019), 45–46.

29 Ömer Sami Coşar, *Troçki İstanbul’da* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2010), 85.

30 Brătianu, *La Mer Noire*, 43.

were likely to become the new engine of growth. The Soviet Empire slowed down this trend. After its disintegration, oil and natural gas exports by sea, from an ever greater energy supply zone, came to determine not only Russia's but also the Black Sea's global role. We wait to see if this will merely renew its fortunes as a *plaque tournante*, this time as an energy hub, or accomplish even more. Whereas in the past external actors intruded to initiate momentum for change by reshaping the division of labor, this time, local actors of international stature may well call the tune.

5 The Heart and Soul of the Matter

Matvejevic wrote: "If any part of the Mediterranean gear can be considered symbolic, it is the net."³¹ This was even truer of the Black Sea, where a higher ratio of inhabitants short of arable land depended on sea for their livelihood. The fishing net has always occupied a unique place in the Black Sea's scenery. It is paradoxical that a sea in which life is limited to the upper layer only should be populated by a variety of fish species such as anchovies, mackerel, sardines, turbot, and tuna.³² Gündüz Vassaf, a contemporary Turkish writer, distinguished by his rhapsodic style reminiscent of Matvejevic, lists examples of fish penetrating into the symbols of the region, including Byzantine coins with engravings of bonitos (sometimes accompanied by dolphins). He emphasizes that the only place where the trajectories of whales (named Porphyryon and alleged to have disrupted the sea traffic periodically for over fifty years during the times of Empress Theodora) and Black Sea anchovies (*hamsi*) intersected was the Bosphorus.³³

The Black Sea has been a destination for many a Mediterranean fisherman and their fleets by virtue of its fisheries. Even before their arrival, however, the indigenous population, starting out from their riverine prior experiences, had already developed their fishing skills, and built up local knowhow concerning the seasons, winds, storms, and skills of interpreting the sky. Since then, the rhythm of life and the struggle to make a living off the sea have been subject to the dictates of the fishing calendar, at least until recently. The cycle and circle thus inserted into the flows through time

³¹ Matvejevic, *Mediterranean*, 59.

³² In this respect, the Caspian Sea is also in the same league and with an advantage. It is famous for its abundance of high-quality caviar, as well as sturgeons, salmon, seal, and other fish species. Whereas the Mediterranean remains a "desert" in terms of supplies essential for the nourishment of fish, the Black Sea and the Caspian, especially in the north, are richly endowed with plankton. Black Sea anchovy need on average 80,000 tons of plankton per day during the summer, about a fifth of the daily produce. The role of anchovy in the reproduction of the eco-system is considerable. The estimates for the anchovy stock (1968–89) ranged between 346,000 and 461,000 tons. See Kudret Emiroğlu, A. Cemal Saydam, and Nihal K. Çevik, *Hamsi Kurban O Göze* (Istanbul: Heyamola Yayınları, 2008), 14, 74, 98–100.

³³ Gündüz Vassaf, *Boğaziçi'nde Balık* (Istanbul: YKY, 2016), 53, 61–62.

and space have been fundamental in bringing about a uniquely important circulation that we wish to address below.

Ovid, the Roman poet, banished to Tomis (today: Constanța, Romania) to live among the “barbarians” while expecting clemency in vain from the emperor in return for his apologetic poetry is well known. Much less known is the fact that, towards the end of his life, he was inspired by what he saw with his own eyes on the Black Sea and in the Danube Delta to write his *Halieutica*, a fragmentary didactic poem on fishing.³⁴ Magris was also impressed by the Danube Delta and its ability to regenerate itself with its rich diversity of flora and fauna, including some 110 species of fish.³⁵ The Danube Delta is not alone in this respect. Until recently, the Sea of Azov, benefitting from the delta of the river Don, served as the “home of more than a hundred breeds of fish.”³⁶

One of the many rivers that join the Danube is the Tisza River (Serbian: Tisa), and on the small island at its intersection with the Maros River (Romanian: Mureș), we are told, one eats the best fish soup in the world, according to a literary source. Magris adds that, according to the tradition, two-thirds of the Tisza River consisted of water and one-third of fish and other aquatic produce.³⁷ This may involve much exaggeration, as he admits, but contains more than a grain of truth. In the Black Sea world, freshwater fish rivaled the catch from the sea.³⁸ A compendium of fish in Georgia, with a coastline share of 315 km, identifies a total of 168 species, of which sixty-one species inhabit freshwater, seventy-seven inhabit the sea, and thirty are transitory. Rich diversity and the porousness between categories command our attention.³⁹ We obtain a similar impression from an observant folklorist, Kemal Özbıyık, a native of Arhavi on the easternmost Turkish coast, which shares the highland-lowland mix characteristic of neighboring Georgia, when he notes how until recently locals opted for the abundant trout found in the streams, which are now threatened by hydroelectric power plants under construction.⁴⁰

At about the same time as Ovid, Pliny the Elder in his natural history shared information on tuna that crossed into the Black Sea in spring because this was where they laid eggs. Fish grew fast from one day to the next because of the less salty waters

34 Çiğdem Dürüşken, “Ovidius ve Epistulae ex Ponto Üzerine,” in Publius Ovidius Naso, *Karadeniz'den Mektuplar* (Istanbul: YKY, 1999), 14.

35 Magris also notes how the Roma among many other outcasts and refugees found a safe haven in the delta and adapted themselves to its life cycle just like the conscientiously troubled Lipovans, who became a fishing community making their living peacefully from the river.

36 Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea* (London: Vintage, 1996), 5.

37 Magris, *Danube*, 392, 541–51.

38 Both domains combined provide us with a pointer to draw the boundaries of the Black Sea world.

39 We are faced here with the devil in the details. Deeply anchored it in the Black Sea world, Georgia had nevertheless been, until the nineteenth century, much less sea-looking. Beyond this microcosmic difference is found a more general attribute of the Black Sea: “Its faunal complex is made up mostly of Paratethys relictic fauna.” Nargiza Ninua, Bella Japoshvili, and Vera Bochorishvili, *Fishes of Georgia* (Tbilisi: Tsigni Eri Publishing, 2013), 5.

40 Kemal Özbıyık, *Üzerleri Toz Olmasın: Doğu Karadeniz'de Yaş Almak* (Ankara: Karina, 2016), 226.

enriched by rivers, and the safe haven they found from dangerous marine species. He supplied incredible details of their progress through the Bosphorus as they exited the Black Sea, taking the wind at the back. Because there was a bright white rock reflecting light sharply on the right bank near Chalcedon on the Asian side, scared tuna shoals escaped to the European side, where they could be caught easily, and where the fishermen still stand with their rods in hand. Because harsh weather with occasional freezing affects the upper levels of water, there occurs a large seasonal migration through the Straits to the warmer waters of the Marmara and the Aegean Seas, followed by a reverse movement in spring. Istanbul benefits greatly from its positional advantage for easy and abundant spring and autumn catches. Because of pollution in the Black Sea and overfishing, the size and variety of the fish stock have been declining for some time.

As distinct from the two-sided traffic separated by an intervening season through the Bosphorus, there exists a “circulation proper” within the Black Sea that commands our attention by virtue of its uniqueness. It is no coincidence that this circle is largely identified with anchovies, small in size but great in significance, being the most abundant and characteristic fish of the Black Sea. Anchovies are consumed largely as a basic food in the region and beyond.⁴¹ It is part of common people’s diet, consumed in combination with corn (bread) in places like northeastern Anatolia short of land to grow wheat. Local cuisine has been incredibly creative in preparing even desserts with them. At times when the catch exceeded normal levels, it was also used as a fertilizer in tobacco cultivation, and sometimes even in vegetable and fruit gardens.⁴² In 1928, Hamamizade İhsan published his extraordinary book in praise of them, his *Hamsiname*, in Trabzon, the most fitting place of all.

Anchovies are most concentrated in the Sea of Azov, where they lay their eggs in May and June. As the weather gets cooler, they pass to the warmer Black Sea to spend the winter. They let themselves be carried by the current rather than swimming, hence the concentration of anchovies in hordes that sometimes hit the shore because of strong waves. This anti-clockwise migration cycle starts around September, reaches the Danube Delta, proceeds off the coasts of Romania and Bulgaria, and reaches the Turkish coastline by November, tracing it via Sinop until Trabzon, where the fish appear having attained full size by December. Sometime around January, they reach the southeastern corner. With the weather warming by March, the northward migration begins. Off the coast of Batumi the anchovy shoals divide into two. One subgroup proceeds along the coasts of Georgia and Abkhazia before reaching ultimately its original starting point. This group thus completes the greater full circle anticlockwise. The other subgroup returns to Sinop, from where it crosses to the Crimean coastline. This trajectory, despite a slight detour, also traced anti-clockwise, amounts to a smaller circle. Yet

⁴¹ Turbot (*kalkan*), almost extinct, or bluefish (*lüfer*) are considered more prestigious and desirable for consumption.

⁴² Hamamizade İhsan, *Hamsiname* (Ankara: Phoenix, 2007), 37–41.

the original points of departure remain as the final destination in both circles. This is the “circulation” *par excellence* characteristic of the Black Sea. According to one estimate dating from the 1980s, about “a million tons of anchovies swam in this circular pilgrimage” annually.⁴³

One of the remarkable features of Black Sea ecology is the seasonal migrations of several fish species that circulate in a[n anti]-clockwise fashion [...] The spirit of [the] Varna convention [of 1959, when the Black Sea was most divided at the height of the Cold War] reflects the regional structure of the marine ecology that has encouraged contact and cooptation by fishermen for millennia.⁴⁴

This circulation was like no other in terms of its spatial as well as its temporal scope, its completeness, its backward and forward linkages in the economic sense, and, finally, its anthropological and ecological overall significance. Looking back from where we are, nothing is likely to measure up to either the resilience or the romance of the fishing cycle, as also manifested in the circulation of songs, stories, symbols, and routines along the way, while it served to shoulder the increasingly impossible task—under pressure from centrifugal forces—of the integration of labor as constitutive of the Black Sea world.

⁴³ Ascherson, *Black Sea*, 6.

⁴⁴ Doonan, “The Corrupting Sea,” 70.