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Review of

JONATHAN MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens. Cosmopolitan Society and
Cultural Change in Massawa*

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Reviews

Es ist sicherlich eine langwierige und mühsame Arbeit gewesen, die Handschriften durchzusehen und auszuwerten, auch wenn diese in Editionen vorlagen. Trotz der Untergliederung in Themenbereiche oder periodische Abschnitte erschließt sich diese Arbeit nicht ohne weiteres, wird allerdings eine wertvolle Quelle bleiben.

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JONATHAN MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens. Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, Bloomington – Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009. XIV, 380 pp., illustrations, maps, tables. Price: US-\$ 27,95 (Paperback). ISBN: 1–800–842–6796.

The available bibliography on Massawa is impressively wide and variegated. From the colonial report to the contemporary historiography on the Red Sea, from the travelogues to the economic analysis of local trade, the manifold literature on Massawa proves how much the town has been attracting the interest of the scholars who have investigated the different aspects of its history, culture, society and architecture.

Jonathan Miran (Department of Liberal Studies, Western Washington University) has now produced a rich, well written and attracting book on the social and cultural history of the town in the 19th century which fills a desideratum.

Mirans's book is structured in a very dense theoretical introduction (pp. 1–32), five chapters (pp. 33–267) and a conclusion (pp. 268–279). A glossary and a wide apparatus of explicatory notes (pp. 281–333) complete the bulk of the text.

In the introduction, the author declares to have drawn a vitalizing inspiration from Fernand Braudel's historiography of the Mediterranean society and economy: the concept of "conjoncture", for example, is indicated as one of the pivots of the intellectual structure supporting the entire research presented in the book. Miran makes also a wise use of the most recent critical approaches to the history of the seas and their societies ("new thalassology")¹ and exploits the complex idea of "littoral society"² to analyze and frame his data in a consequently built construction.

¹ PERIGRINE HORDEN – NICHOLAS PURCELL, "The Mediterranean and 'the New Thalassology'", *American Historical Review* 111, 3, 2006, pp. 722–740; and see also, however, a more cautious approach in EDWARD PETERS, "Quid nobis cum pelage? The New Thalassology and the Economic History of Europe", *Journal of Interdisciplinary*

Indeed, on this clear and solid theoretical background Miran manages to organize and display the results of a long and painstaking field work in Eritrea (in 1999–2000, 2001, 2006 and 2007) and of a patient archival research in Italy (2004). The extensive bibliography (pp. 335–360) demonstrates the seriousness of Miran’s scientific activity in collecting and exploiting the available published sources and in discovering fresh and unknown first-hand documents.

In particular, the main highlight of the book – at least to the present reviewer – is that the author managed to find an access to a previously untouched Arabic archival source: the records of the Islamic court of Massawa (*al-maḥkama al-šar‘īya*) at the *mağlis al-awqāf* of the town. Miran utilizes the records from 1866 to 1880, in particular those related to the real estate, to present a clear and vivid description of the dynamics of the socio-economic evolution of the town in the second half of the 19th century. A full publication of these documents – the way Alessandra Vianello, Mohammed M. Kassim and Lidwien Kapteijns did with similar material from Brava³ – would be a tremendous contribution to the enhancement of our knowledge of the history, society and the culture of Massawa. It is much hoped that Miran will proceed to carry out this task in the next future.

Moreover, a long list of informants interviewed in Massawa, Ĕmbərəmi, Asmara and other towns in Eritrea demonstrates the carefulness with which the author has collected not only historical oral traditions but also family memories, genealogical data and even the psychological perceptions which people have of the town and its inhabitants.

Miran in fact does not limit himself to a description of the socio-economic landscapes (the sea-trade and the connection with the hinterland) on whose background Massawa developed its commercial network and its economic fortune⁴. A substantial part of his work – but one could well say

History 34, 1, 2003, pp. 49–61 and, specifically for the Indian Ocean area, in MARKUS P.M. VINK, “Indian Ocean Studies and ‘the new thalassology’”, *Journal of Global History* 2, 1, 2007, pp. 41–62.

² Discussed by MICHAEL N. PEARSON in “Littoral Society: the Case for the Coast”, *Great Circle* 7, 1, 1985, pp. 1–5.

³ ALESSANDRA VIANELLO – MOHAMMED M. KASSIM – LIDWIEN KAPTEIJNS (eds.), *Servants of the Sharia: The Civil Register of the Qadis’ Court of Brava, 1893–1900*, (*African Sources for African History* 6), 2 vols., Leiden: Brill, 2006.

⁴ In this respect, Miran much opportunely underlines (pp. 84–90) the importance of the westerly trade route that linked Massawa to Kassala, and thence to the Sudan and much far away to West Africa. Normally, this connection of Massawa to the West African region is neglected in the scholarly literature, except from the research carried out on the *Takārīr* communities in Eritrea and Ethiopia and their *ḥağğ* journey to Mecca.

the real red thread through the whole book – is devoted to the effort of constructing and deconstructing the group (ethnic, to a certain extent) identity of the different social layers and classes composing the population of Massawa. Traders, soldiers, entrepreneurs, brokers and adventurous seafarers from Asia and Africa came and settled in the port town where they built up an active commercial and a leading politico-administrative class. Peoples from the coastal area and immigrants from the highlands⁵ entered into a bi-univocal relation with the town and its “patricians”⁶ and contributed decisively to the formation of a very mixed society where family networks and marriage linkages (well described in table 3, p. 261) were used as instruments of change and/or preservation of the authority and power in the urban space.

Massawa became thus *a lieu de métissage* (p. 17) and its inhabitants developed a kind of identity pattern which combines the pride of originating from every corner of the world and that of belonging at the same time to the “pure”, “real” citizens of the town. The author describes with a balanced attention the apparently paradoxical combination of inclusivist and exclusivist notions and of local and global components in the identity of the Massawans and he evaluates the relationships of this complex corpus of psychological and cultural materials with the universalistic influence of Islam and its social institutions (cp. 4, pp. 166–216).

Of course, the “contradictory” facets of the identity of the Massawans are not peculiar to them alone. Miran is well aware that the same mixture of cosmopolitanism and localism could be found also among the inhabitants of the Banaadir or Swahili coastal towns (and of many other port cities of the world, one might surmise). However, the great merit of the author is that he has managed to clearly and precisely describe the specific Massawan reality in the 19th century, its historical and cultural dynamics and provided the scholars with an insightful, enriching and inspiring book which will surely become a must-read reference for many years to come.

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⁵ See p. 119 map 5 for the places of origin of the Massawans.

⁶ The author (p. 228) refers to the Weberian concept of *patriciate* – “a class of urban notables governing a city” – as applied by Hourani to the Islamic history; see also SCOTT S. REESE, *Patricians of the Benaadir: Islamic Learning, Commerce, and Somali Urban Identity in the Nineteenth Century*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1936.