SOMA 2000: the results of the symposium in retrospective

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F. Braudel argued once that the Mediterranean is not necessarily a single entity, being divided into smaller worlds, each one with its own particular history and cultural identity, due to the various peninsulas, gulfs and islands that create separate archipelagi and basins. This fragmentation was in a way reflected within the multivocality of topics and approaches in the papers and posters presented at the Sheffield symposium. There was a significant span in space - from the Iberian peninsula to the Levant - and time (from early prehistory to well after the Middle Ages), not to mention the various approaches. The latter covered themes like the construction of epistemological categories and narratives, artefact analysis within the overall study of past technologies in their social context, the archaeology of death, the use and meaning of symbols and systems of signification and the study of past environments and landscapes.

As a result, there were no concrete final conclusions, because there was no central axis to the discussions, except for a common concern on the issue of identity and the ways in which the latter can be studied through archaeological remains. This atmosphere prompted John Barrett in his closing statement to wonder what makes all these people with so diverse background and topics come together and talk? Is there an undoubtedly pre-existing Mediterranean identity, or are we trying to forge it for specific reasons? Is such a venture viable, given the prominence of regional studies and the apparent fragmentation and why?

An apparent answer is that the Mediterranean is like a coin with two sides. Apart from any regionalism, there have been cases where this sea basin was considered as a whole. Whether it was about the Roman propaganda of the mare nostrum, the piratical ventures of the 17th - 18th century AD, or a common appreciation for the sun, olive oil and wine, common ground has never been absent. There has always been significant traffic within the great green sea. This interaction has resulted into the movement of people, objects and ideas leading to shared ways of life. The Mediterranean is a multivocal and dynamic area and it is this dynamism that SOMA wishes to bring within archaeological discussion. Hence, any regional diversity is not to be feared or eschewed, but rather considered an arena for dynamic exchange of ideas from which everybody has to gain something, either as direct feedback, or as
a widening of horizons. As organisers of the Sheffield venue, this is the spirit with which we perceived of the various discussions.

Organising SOMA

SOMA entailed a marathon of practical issues to be solved along the way, and thus a body of knowledge, which up to now was handed down from previous organisers to the following committee. Postgraduate students however, are bound to leave their departments after finishing their studies. This fact made an account of the practical issues we faced, when we organised the venue at Sheffield, seem necessary for future reference.

Organising SOMA was a year-round effort, with a few critical moments. First, we had to prepare a proposal in order to apply to organise the event. This application had to be ready one year before, at SOMA 1999. Then, the first call for papers had to circulate before May, during term-time. The second call had to be out after September, again within term-time. We had to organise the abstracts in sessions during Christmas holidays and work hard at least two weeks before the symposium, preparing the folders with the abstracts and the rest of necessary documentation, making final arrangements for the lecture theatres, A/V equipment and catering for the Friday reception and Sunday lunch. In addition, there was a daily email communication with people asking for information. Finally, the preparation of the abstracts for publication was another demanding task.

The above required a devoted group of three people. G.Vavouranakis, D.Catapoti and M.F.Lane started the effort. When we got tired half way through, we were almost substituted by E.Nodarou and M.Catapoti. During the final two weeks and during the symposium, fourteen people were involved in order to ensure that the event run smoothly. We also had full support by all the staff members in the department, particularly our supervisors, the head of the department and of course the departmental secretary. The budget was our main concern. We managed to decrease costs by communicating through email, advertising the symposium through various discussion lists, and printing at free access printers. Part of the costs was covered from a departmental grant, and another part from the bookfare profits. Folder fees made sure that we could even pass a small amount of money to the next organising committee.

SOMA: assessing the principles.
SOMA is a fragile event, being organised by postgraduate students, without any permanent supervising committee. Hence the main principles of the symposium have been up to now handed down from one organiser to the other. This part presents the Sheffield approach to these principles, for future reference.

SOMA is about the whole of the Mediterranean, and not about selected parts of its archaeology. The hosts should encourage all contributions, despite their own particular research interests. The Sheffield venue saw two trends, a major one towards Aegean prehistory, and a minor one towards Western Mediterranean archaeology. Such trends should arise out of the participants themselves and not be imposed a priori. In addition, they should not be used to intimidate other people, either directly or indirectly. The SOMA hosts have a specific duty for preserving the holistic and dynamic character of the event.

SOMA has to be specifically designed for the needs of postgraduate students, whose research is not necessarily at the final stage. Contributions in the form of finished papers are absolutely welcome, but they should not discourage others to come and share their thoughts about their topic in progress. Furthermore, the tight limit of completing a PhD within three years - at least for people in the UK - has important repercussions on the range of activities a postgraduate can attend and the ways in which such work can be presented. These observations, however, do not hint to a compromise in the quality of the presentations. On the contrary, standards should be kept as high as possible. It is the overall character, or spirit, of the symposium that matters here. While the structure and requirements of a formal symposium should be maintained, emphasis should be placed upon discussion and exchange of ideas within a critical but positive atmosphere. In the same vein, the topics of interest announced by the host should always be flexible, in order to enable people to participate and not force them into pre-bracketed watertight areas of research. Some inconsistency between the topics and the abstracts received should be expected and dealt with, by organising sessions again in a flexible way that will not make any participant - or at least as few as possible - feel isolated.

Publication of proceedings has been one of the major issues at all SOMA events. It has to be stated, first of all, that all decisions of similar importance should be reconfigured during each year’s plenary session. Only the participants themselves can decide whether they want their contributions to be published. However, the character of the symposium should always be the top priority. An informal postgraduate forum may mean that many of the contributors cannot afford to present finished papers, either because their ideas are still in a rough form, or because they may be bound to change within
the next couple of years. In addition, work in progress cannot usually stand external reviewing, which is usually required for printed volumes. This is due to the form and structure of the texts and not because of the brightness of ideas or contents in general. Such strategies would inevitably lead to publish a selection of papers, thus altering the character of the symposium. Although the trend towards publication has to be respected, this should not convert SOMA from a discussion forum into a static ground for publishing papers only. Flexibility should always be kept in mind.

The Sheffield approach to the issue was a publication of extended abstracts in electronic form, i.e. in the “assemblage”. We thought that an abstract is small enough to be afforded by most postgraduates in terms of time and effort. Secondly, nobody was forced to give an abstract. Whoever decided to submit one though had the chance of making his topic of interest known, without having to expose ideas which may still be premature, in full extent. These abstracts have indicative character and their publication is supposed to promote further discussion and exchange of ideas by giving the opportunity to people to make their ideas known to a wider public, while letting this audience to contact them for any details too. A publication in assemblage fulfils all formal requirements, since there is an ISS number. However, electronic journals are still more flexible ways of academic communication than printed volumes, which look more like casting in stone. In addition, “assemblage” is the offspring of postgraduate effort, and hence the perfect place to accommodate another postgraduate event.