

## TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN CONNECTIONS

ARTICLE

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The first time I travelled on a freighter, I boarded *CMA CGM Corte Real* in Malta in February 2015. Though the business headquarters of CMA CGM is in a building designed by Zaha Hadid in Marseille, the company's European transport hub is in Malta. Malta's free-port designation protects shippers from taxes on transshipments, while its proximity to the Middle East, Africa and Europe makes it a geographically convenient distribution centre for goods to be transhipped from there. At that time, *Corte Real* was, at 366 metres long, one of the largest CMA CGM ships and because of its length and width, it could not berth at all the ports that dot the company's maps of places it does business. Marsaxlokk in Malta has gantry cranes with arms broad enough to accommodate *Corte Real's* width, berths long enough to allow the ship to fit alongside, and its harbour has been dredged deep enough to accommodate laden ships easily.

The village of Marsaxlokk teems with seafarers, and buses full of crew members and officers arriving to board ships or leaving to go home by ferry between its modest hotels and the sun-drenched airport. The crew members of *Corte Real* were ashen faced with hangovers, though very warmly welcoming, the day I came aboard, as the city of Valletta, some ten kilometres away, is known for its bars and nightclubs, and its proximity and ebullient atmosphere make it a welcoming port of call for the seafarers. The seafarers were also relieved to be in the Mediterranean, after having come from Bremerhaven and Antwerp through the Bay of Biscayne, where predictably, the sea had been unsettled. The other passengers on the ship told me awed stories of the ship listing 45 degrees in the storm. They had had to tie down all furniture in their rooms to prevent them from flying around when the ship would hit the trough of a gigantic wave.

How has Malta become such an important node of trade for CMA CGM? The specific qualities of ports that become nodes of trade matters: how updated are their facilities, how deep are their harbours, what bunkering services do they provide? Global factors also matter: the volume of trade being transported by ships could result in a great many containers being shipped to China entirely empty. The volume of cargo shipped from one site to another in turn determines freight rates on those routes. The price of oil affects bunkering rates and therefore the unit cost of transportation by sea. But determining the routes a ship would take isn't only a concatenation of a series of rational calculations. CMA CGM is in some ways distinct from the other European shipping firms with which it competes. The firm has Middle Eastern roots with its founders, the

Saade brothers, hailing from Syria and moving their shipping business to Marseille during the Lebanese civil war. A quarter of the company's shares are, at least for the moment, held by the major Turkish shipping and mining conglomerate, the Yildirim Group. CMA CGM has also long had shipping alliances with the United Arab Shipping Company, the firm owned by several countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Many of CMA CGM's hubs *and* smaller feeder ports are in the Arab world, and the sinuous routes that connect its European and Asian termini often snake through Arab ports.

CMA CGM's own history is fascinating. Compagnie Maritime d'Affrètement (CMA) was originally founded in Marseille to ship cars across the Mediterranean. Some 20 years later, it bought the newly privatised French colonial shipping firm Compagnie Générale Maritime (CGM). In a sense, the connections that today define so much of the trade across the Mediterranean and further away echo these past colonial connections.

Another aspect of the Mediterranean connections is the slow transformation of the cities where ports are located. Marseille is a case in point. Its Vieux Port at the centre of town was once a thriving freight port, but by the late 19th century it had become too small to serve this function. It is now a centre of leisure, flanked by bars and restaurants, and in the mornings it hosts a fish market. Its harbour is full of bobbing fishing boats and pleasure crafts. A little further out from the centre, and halfway to the gleaming CMA CGM headquarters, is Marseille's modern port, which today hosts cruiseships and ferries, but was for a time the main freight port of Marseille. Today this port lies 40 km away at Fos-sur-Mer, invisible and unreachable on foot. As the port moves further away, so does the ability of dockers and seafarers to disrupt the flow of ordinary politics in the centre of cities as modes of resistance.

This gradual shifting of the port from city centres to the distance also says something about the urban transformations that the boom in shipping has wrought. The boom in shipping has also brought with it massive ports, with Valencia, Piraeus and Tangier Med powering ahead of many others. These ports become significant because they receive vast cargoes from the East or act as nodes of inland redistribution. Piraeus is a significant bunkering (or ship re-fuelling) port as well and this characteristic makes it vulnerable to oil spills.

The routes across the Mediterranean shift as new ports come to the fore. But they are often pinned by other geographic vagaries or imperial histories: the most travelled route is from the Suez Canal, an engineering wonder and a colonial debt travesty in the East, to the Strait of Gibraltar, itself a site of one-time British naval dominance. But beyond these geopolitical placements, specific economic plans – for example of free zones – can also lead to the rise of some ports. This, to some extent, reflects the significance of Malta as an entrepot port for CMA CGM. Meanwhile, global shipping companies order increasingly larger ships, and as their numbers dwindle through mergers and acquisitions, so do the number of the ports that can accommodate the ever-deepening draughts of their prodigiously-sized ships. In fact, until 2008, the larger shipping companies based in Europe benefited from an antitrust immunity conferred on them by European Council Regulation No. 4056/86 (itself drafted in 1986). The 1986 regulation allowed these shipping firms to act as cartels and coordinate in setting prices, polling

cargos, and harmonising schedules for trade. The repeal of the Regulation took place likely in response to the meteoric rise of China and other Asian companies in shipping and passing their own regulations protecting their shipping firms from antitrust regulation. The effect of the shipping repeal in 2008 was a precipitous drop in freight rates, exacerbated by the global financial and economic crash that saw a 20% decline in global trade. These ebbs and flows in the strength of trade – which we also saw during the COVID pandemic –, and the extent to which labour unions on the docks and onboard ships are able to challenge it, are what will determine the future not only of shipping companies, but also of port development across the Mediterranean.