

Editoriale
di Lucio Valerio Barbera

From City to City

I studied the tragedy “The Persians” by Aeschylus in the last year of classical lyceum and I had to translate, as was then customary, a short passage from ancient Greek into Italian. I learned that Pericles urged Aeschylus to stage a tragedy suited to elicit in the Athenians the memory of the glorious naval battle of Salamis against Xerxes, King of Kings, which occurred on eight years prior, in 480 B.C. I expected to read words of warrior pride, elevated patriotic rhetoric, ethnic and cultural superiority. My expectations were natural: at school, the Battle of Salamis had been presented to me not only in the high school history course but also, very summarized – a sort of preview – in middle school. That fascinating ancient event had even made an appearance last years of elementary school and, as occurs in every school of the Western world, it had contributed to educating us, from our tender age, to project our identity onto that of the ancient Greeks. We had learned that from the Romans, who, if rich and noble, trimmed their beards “Greek style”, filled their gardens with marvelous copies of marvelous Greek statues and would speak and write in Greek, like the emperor Marcus Aurelius. Suetonius, the great Roman historian, claimed that Julius Caesar exclaimed in Greek, and not in Latin, the famous line in consternation to his dear adopted son who was stabbing him: *καὶ σὺ, τέκνον?* Stuff for the true upper class and certainly not that *tu quoque, Brute, fili mī*, as had been translated and conveyed to us who certainly of ancient Greek do not understand anything, despite the years of laborious studies. For us Italian children, then, as for all westerners of good schools, one fact is certain: in the battle of Salamis, our ancestors routed the Persians, defeating the Orient.

The Orient. Today, for Italians also, as for all westerners, the Orient, in all its true dimension and variety of landscapes and cultures, truly envelops the world and seems to embrace us tightly. The genius

of Christopher Columbus – nearly two thousand years after Salamis – had intuited it too early and somewhat erroneously. True: between us and the Orient, “westward” was the unexpected, but lucrative obstacle of America. Nonetheless in the end – I mean today – the West, though extended all the way to the Pacific, feels surrounded by the Orient that silently irrigates our world with goods and people. But for us students of Italian schools – European schools, I would say – the Orient that greeted us in schoolbooks was not the boundless one of today: it was – and still is – the Orient of the Greeks, therefore of the Romans, with its uncertain and undefinable boundary, so fluid over history that at times it seemed to flee, even farther to the Orient, before the great generals on our side – the Greek side, naturally – while at other times, instead, it forced our forebears to shut themselves within the walls of their cities praying to the gods or to the Heaven not to be reached by its irresistible advance towards the West. In the age of Pericles certainly, the Orient mortally alternative to Greece had the home of its origins in very distant lands, those that began down there, in the valley of the two rivers, and extended past the mountains of the Medes all the way to the Persian plateau. Anatolia, Syria, Phoenicia, and Egypt, instead, defined the perimeter and the wealth of our home sea, in whose center – in Crete – was planted for all of them, the ancient Mediterraneans, the compass rose; and it is still rooted there now, for us modern Mediterraneans. The Mediterranean of the Greeks was a sea of diverse peoples, in whose ports people spoke, all together, Greek dialects and barbarian tongues – as the Greeks called them – and of which Plato could not bear the promiscuity but of whom he recognized the irreplaceable function for Greek life itself, for their wealth, and the expansion of their culture. And the Greek cities – our cities! – were scattered and nestled all along the great arc of that sea, from its western to its Oriental coasts, from Syracuse to Cyprus, interspersed with cities of other lineages, other lineages, competing with each other for wealth and always fighting for the dominance of a trade route, of an island rich in minerals, for a market, and a strategic arm of the sea. “You’re right Ludovico,” I said while with Quaroni we talked of these things, “it must have been a magnificent world: Miletus, Ephesus, Smyrna... Lyndos... Halicarnassus..., the Ionic cities of Greece, that I imagine luminous of marble and... intellects, they did not refuse to be

fiscally submitted to the King of Lydia provided it was convenient for their commerce: while that Oriental King – Croesus, that’s it, Croesus – anxiously and devotedly awaited the predictions from the Greek shrines for which he realized masterpieces of architecture at his expense.” “You mean, the Arthemision. Yes, it must have been beautiful.” – Ludovico smiled at my top-of-the-class tirades, finally looking away from the plane window through which – for quite a while – he waited to catch sight, from between the strands of clouds, of the glimmers of the Mediterranean.

The glimmers of the Mediterranean. That time, returning from Tehran, we decided to take a Pan Am flight that allowed us, at no extra cost, a two-day stopover in Istanbul before taking off again for Rome. The weather over Anatolian Turkey must have been really bad if the jumbo, upon leaving Tehran, was diverted over the Mediterranean, which it had just reached, after an hour’s flight, at a stretch of the coast between Antioch and Laodicea, between Turkey and Syria. When we had been told of the deviation, Quaroni wanted to change seats and went to sit next to the window. The large Pan Am was certainly not full. We were off-season; in fact we, were enjoying our “low season” tourism offer. The hostess brought us, unsolicited, a bottle of Shiraz wine, Persian, and two fine glass chalices; the captain began to inform us, from time to time, on the flight route, as for making amends for the deviation that lengthened the flight and not by a little. The city of Antioch to our right, he informed us. Too late. We managed, however, to catch a glimpse of Cyprus – yes, Cyprus – to our left. Ludovico – so he told me – hoped to see the islands and the ragged coast after Rhodes; “beautiful islands, even more beautiful, the coast” he exclaimed. He was from the generation for whom that group of islands scattered between Crete, Cyclades, and Samos – the Dodecanese islands – for thirty years had been an Italian asset, especially dear for some architects who had been his teachers at the faculty; historians and planners. He remained fixed at the window while the names announced by the captain – Antioch, Laodicea, and Cyprus – and the first glass of Shiraz warmed our conversation. We were coming from Persia, we had met in Tehran: now we were flying over the Greek sea, over its ancient cities, over Aphrodite’s island – Aphrodite’s ... worth a toast, Ludovico! – and we

were headed towards Constantinople on the last leg of our trip to Rome. We were crossing in its entirety the space of the ancient world, that space where, at that time, by pure chance we would meet from time to time as we moved, each on his own task, among its cities of greatest fate and the most beautiful. The thoughts of that world had soared with us; with us always. Of that world we used to reason between us each time we happened to pass an evening alone together or with our refined Iranian hosts, strolling aimlessly along walks under the monumental sycamores of Tehran or sitting in the garden of an old hotel in the countryside enjoying Iranian vodka under the very bright sky of Fars, on the border of the desert. Even when we had not met for months our conversation picked up as if it had never been interrupted. “Here” Ludovico turned to me one of those evenings, after a moment of silence, “when my wife, Gabriella, asks me what we talk about so much, you and I, when we meet here in Persia, I answer, we converse... *comparing... the departed seasons, and the present and alive, and the sound of her.*” He chuckled in his beard at his irreverent use of the words of the great Giacomo [Leopardi]. But it was true. In those conversations swaying between antiquity and our time, between history and that instant of our lives that witnessed our being thrust into another time, only the way we dressed reminded us we were from a future that in our hearts did not hope for those places. And we conversed with our Persian friends like travelers outside of time, really comparing the cities of our many modernities, dead or dying, to the antiquity here and alive of present Persia. It was in these conversations that I understood how much in Ludovico the vision of the future city was bound to the transfiguration of the ancient city, as if to finally design a new world worthy of the great past of our history it would be necessary to erase and forget all the models of modernity experimented in the West and imposed universally, stacking one over the other, in all their monumental, mechanical archaism; and failures. In him was ever present the cultural training of a generation of Italians that could not help but confront – even if only to refute – the original Futurism, that of Marinetti “the Egyptian” who sought vital energy in the technology of the future and in the native strength – even brutish – of the past: to destroy the West.

The West. We were more than half an hour from Istanbul; but the airplane, warned by the weather service, turned northward. It was no longer necessary to circumvent the Anatolian peninsula. The storm had moved westward. Antalya was the last coastal town announced by the captain before he was completely absorbed by the delicate maneuvers approaching the destination. We were not to see the beautiful Dodecanese islands from above, nor the promontories of the ancient Ionic cities. Ludovico withdrew his attention from the window. Another sip of Shiraz and the conversation came back to life. “Yes – I continued – for the Greek Ionian cities the king of Sardes – Croesus – who spoke a far different language from theirs and was, for them, an extremely wealthy Oriental barbarian, was neither a foreigner nor an enemy. He was a part of their space, their life. His existence, like that of the Phoenician, Syrian, Carthaginian, and Egyptian cities looking out onto the Mediterranean, was essential in defining – through contrast, assonance, complementarity, reciprocal attraction, and competition – Greek identity. The identity of their cities”

“That’s why – continued Ludovico – the real enemies of the Greeks, the Persians, were indispensable for the definition of that identity...”

“... which is ours,” I uttered stubbornly, without interrupting.

“Without the Persian wars – continued Ludovico – without the conflict, not only military but above all ideological, with the Universal Empire, do you truly think the idea of civil liberty, of democracy, of culture popularly shared in the theaters, in the “Agoras”, would have been so deeply engraved in the history of the West?”

“Furthermore – I raised – Themistocles, the real hero of the war, the strategist of Salamis, the victor of the King of Kings, when he was driven from Athens, didn’t he find refuge with Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes? And didn’t the King of Kings order, perhaps, three cities of the Empire to maintain him with their wealth and other two to furnish him clothing and bedding as if he had been a hero of humanity? As we would say today...”

“It seems almost that at times... – Ludovico said to himself as if nostalgically reflecting on lost time; a moment later he collected his thoughts – it seems almost that at that time, from the pain of defeat, from the cruelty of ruins inflicted to one another... from the cries of widows

and mothers – here he lowered his voice imitating a tear-jerking orator – yes, from the confrontation of so many identities agitated on the point of a lance it seems was born the underlying unity of humanity.” He stopped for a second, smiled ironically, and went on “The unity of a privileged humanity, naturally, the one that lived from Carthage on to the East border of Dasht-e Kavir and further, all the way to the Indus. The unity of social classes and peoples that considered themselves civilized, educated, and noble even though arrogantly aggressive with each other...” Paused again. Silent for awhile. Then, “the West is part of the Orient. It is so in mythology – remember the myth of Europa? – and in history. The idea of a Universal Empire...”

“... certainly – I continued, like the diligent assistant called upon to articulate the hints cast by the teacher – the Universal Empire. The only possible alternative to the relentless creative aggression, but self-destructive of the city democracies... Sparta and Athens... and Thebes... and Syracuse. Thucydides in his history....” But I immediately stopped. I began once more with the idea of the Universal Empire. “An empire of self-governing cities, finally at peace with one another, as long as they contributed to the expenses of the central administration and imperial army. Each one with its own god, its own culture... and an endless expanse for their own trade, their own schools of thought, their own art... Darius in his first attempt at conquering Athens brought with him the Athenian Hippias, son of Pisistratus the great, if I’m not mistaken. That was the model: an agreement with whomever of the high ruling class could guarantee the loyalty of their own city to the Universal Empire. And Hippias was ready to do his part.”

“An empire of cities,” ruled Ludovico as if to seal the reasoning. Silence, as if to underline the sentence. A drop of wine. But he went on. “I believe that the strength of the Persian model was in its tolerance. The Hebrews, jealous of their identity almost more than the Greeks, actually proclaimed Cyrus Messiah... he had freed them from Babylonian oppression, had given back their land and... the sea, allowing them to live in that strip of the Mediterranean coast with their own traditions...” He giggled a bit, almost as if to apologize for his historical digression, hiding in his beard. “The Universal Empire and the Achemenidi was such an extraordinary model that for the Greeks it had only one defect:

it was not a Greek empire. But Alexander took care of that: he devoured the Orient becoming himself eastern; he did not destroy cities, only the palace at Persepolis that marked the center of power as Persian.”

“And instead he enriched the empire of cities with other cities – I, the enthusiastic pupil, continued – Greek cities in form and name, the public institutions and in architecture: the theaters, the odeons, the agoras...”

Ludovico looked at me amused and barbed and interrupted me: “Remember the Chandigarh Museum?” Of course I remembered: the trip to northern India organized by Attilio Petruccioli was two or three years prior. I stretched out more comfortably on the seat. The interruption had calmed my schoolboy outburst and the Shiraz was beginning to take effect. For some time we rested. I turned to the question posed by Ludovico regarding the Chandigarh Museum. I knew what he was referring to: the statues of the reign of Gandhara, the Buddhas with their long mustache, the long braids on their necks, the squinting eyes full of visions, wear well-composed Greek clothing, sculpted in perfect Greek style. Before those statues we had asked ourselves, amused, if the Greek attire was a chiton – men’s clothing – or a peplos, for women. Maybe we were both wrong. Perhaps it was a kind of Roman toga, adopted by all the ruling classes of the Hellenistic Universal Empire by the time of Demetrius the Invincible, the Greek king of that distant kingdom, whose lands I believe are now divided among India, Pakistan e Afghanistan. I recalled perfectly that we had played dialectically before one of those statues of which only the tunic was left, hanging on an invisible body, well draped Greek style. No head, no hands, nor legs. Only a solid body dressed Greek style as if it were waiting for different faces – Indian, Greek, or Turkoman – each with its own hairstyle; waiting for legs and rams to be adorned with ornaments according to the native culture of the noble or sacred personage to be clothed. “It would look good on you – I said finally – with your face like a modern Socrates.” He did not answer. We left the museum to resume the tour of the city.

The tour of the city. Chandigarh, on that trip, was of great interest to the members of our group, all architects, with the tribes of our dear ones, wives, husbands, children, not architects, in tow. Le Corbusier, the planner of the city – and of the museum – was the attractor; but each

one had with them a different purpose. I was interested in finding what I believed I intuited in the drawings and the model – beautiful, made of wood – of the Capitol designed by Le Corbusier, that been exhibited at the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome a few years before: it seemed to me that that drawing for the new city of the new India held hidden a secret relation with the great Mughal monuments, the monumental complex of the Taj Mahal, for example, or Humayun's tomb. Testimonies of my hypothesis were – in the models and the drawings by Le Corbusier, which I had carefully consulted – some details that were never realized: the monumental doors, isolated in the landscape, placed at the ends of the main axes of the immense architectonic enclosure exactly like the monumental doors that define and close the immense enclosure of Mughal's imperial tombs. I mentioned as much to Ludovico on the way out of the Chandigarh Museum. Ludovico had lived six decisive years of his life in India, prisoner of the British during the Second World War. That trip of ours – his first return in India since the time of his imprisonment – was more important for him than for the rest of us; surely for Ludovico our going from city to city, landscape to landscape was fraught with anxieties and memories, of already sedimented knowledge and the desire to better and truly understand that world that had harbored him so long without revealing itself except partially, piecewise, in brief displays during the controlled special leaves granted the prisoners by the British. In conversations with me and with others, during that Indian trip, it seemed to me that it was with some effort that he consented to the triviality of our observations, the gratuitous superficiality of our interest for those sites for him far more fateful. To my quote of the great Mughal tombs “That, – he said – that is what interests me about this place, this extreme part of India; here lived, governed, and built the Persian satraps, the Greeks, the Buddhist kingdoms of northern India, the Hindus, and lastly the Mughals, who brought back to these hills the Persian culture that had civilized them. A culture that, in the meantime, had changed profoundly since the time of Xerxes. It had changed its religious themes, I intend, but not its vision of the world, not in the poetic idea of life, the need to translate in architecture the idea of Universal Empire, that here returned, indeed, represented by the Mughals, who spoke a language composed of Persian, Kurdish, and Arabic mixed

together in the imperial camps. And today Le Corbusier intends right here to plant the tents of the modern cultural empire of which he feels he is the prophet; but he uses the Roman *cardo* and *decuman* model as interpreted by American colonialists – the city in the valley, the Capitol on the hill, like the layout of many cities of the British Thirteen Colonies in North America. To do this he has modified the previous model by the American Albert Mayer – a sort of garden city– drawing, however, from the clear ideas sketched out by Maciej Novicki, the architect who had preceded him in the task of designing and giving soul to the new capital of Punjab before dying suddenly. That is what interests me about Chandigarh: it being a city not born as an example of a utopia, but – in the brief time of planning – as the culmination of an elaboration of many intellects and creative insights (Quaroni always avoids talking about art and artistic intuition) and in history’s long time as a final coagulation, but not the last, of a series of innumerable superpositions, substitutions, and contaminations of cultures that, even though they seem to have disappeared, they nourish our deepest conscience; they fertilize the ground where our ideas grow. If we have any.” Lying on the seat of the Pan Am Jumbo I remembered that Ludovico’s Indian lesson very well and I went over it to myself smiling, half-asleep, while the airplane, approaching Constantinople, was jostled due to the tail end of the storm that by now had dissipated Eastward. And in those moments I relived the disappointment that overcame when, the year following that Indian trip, just when everything was ready for a second trip further south towards more distinctly Hindu India – Attilio Petruccioli always at the head of the group and Quaroni as a guide – I was forced to desert the company because work suddenly forced me to Marocco, on the Atlantic coast, at the other end of the ancient world. My wife and my daughter went anyway with our India Company and only once, while I was moving between the cities of the great far western Arab and Berber dynasties, I could fortuitously, by night, with a rickety teletype reach our Indian caravan at a hotel in Cochin. I learned the details of their trip, leading from city to city to understand the history, the culture, and the environment of the new and ancient world; and in turn, I sent them details of my trip, carried out in parallel with theirs, but nine time zones away. From city to city.

From City to City. That was the first time I visited Morocco and, despite having known the Arab world rather well for an average educated European – which I believe I am – and long enough to have learned something – ten years between Syria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the Emirates – despite all this, in Morocco the ancient Arab culture surprised me again for being able to re-elaborate in every site, always differently, the architectonic cultures of our ancient world, Hellenistic and Persian, mixing them together, enriching them with unimaginable and reciprocal contaminations, deriving ever new dominant stylistic features, nevertheless varying, almost infinitely, the architectonic results following the spirit – or better yet, *the soul* – of every country, every place conquered and committed to Islam; I say the soul of each place, but I mean its light, its colors, the quality of the natural materials available to the architects, and above all the tonality and the constructive ability of the local culture, always present under the splendid layer of the new Universal Empire, Arab exactly.

Istanbul airport was now near. Even Ludovico seemed to me to have recovered from the interval of sluggishness caused by our meandering around the last clouds of the storm and the good red wine of Pan Am's galley. Both of us felt the need to prepare for the landing. The head steward informed us, however, that we would be waiting another twenty minutes. The delay had made us lose our turn to land. So I continued with our conversation; I mentioned my memories of Morocco and the parallel trips between there and India, from city to city, and he too remembered it well. I could not keep from airing my consideration of diligent pupil; and I highlighted how Persians and Romans, having newly divided in two the Universal Empire, finally yielded, in the end, to the Arabs who, though they imposed a new religion to two ancient cultures, they unified the architectonic principles spreading the ogival arch in the West and the cupola of Byzantine technique in the Orient. And I concluded: "Sir Christofer Wren, the great English architect, called the Gothic style 'Arabesque Style', knowing full well its Eastern origin – the crusades."

"Do you know Yazd? Yazd city?" Ludovico asked me unexpectedly.

"Of course; we've talked about it at times," I answered.

"And do you know Mehdi Kowsar?"

“Only a little, very little. Mostly by name. I know he graduated in Rome and that he is now chairman of Tehran University. He married a young graduate in architecture from Rome. Her, I remember better; she was one of the very good young students; some, like her, were very good. I met them when I was your assistant in the fifth year class. Her name is Silvana. Silvana Manco. I think Kowasr is a friend of Paolo Angeletti, you know, that young teacher, my age, refined designer, my classmate. Paolo has many Persian friends who graduated in Rome. Together they make – rather they made – a fine team. But I don’t remember Mehdi Kowsar among them.”

“I’ll introduce you to him. You really must get to know him. He is very different from Mirfendereski, who you know well. But they are close friends. First the one, then the other, as chairmen of the School of architecture in Tehran, in succession, they have profoundly reformed that school.”

“Following your advices?” I knew quite well that Ludovico had begun visiting Persia precisely on invitation by Mirfendereski when he had the responsibility of directing the School of architecture in Tehran. I believe he called Ludovico as his special “academic” advisor. Mirfendereski had been his student when Ludovico was professor at the Florence University. And Ludovico’s work continued with the new Dean, Kowsar, who was student in Rome. And I was not wrong. But the dialogue continued on Yazd.

“Mehdi Kowsar was appointed to study and design the new Development Plan for Yazd – announced Ludovico – and he asked to be able to reason with me, aside from any professional responsibility, the way you reflect with... with a friend... knowledgeable” – he answered in a droll manner as if to be excused for his knowledge.

“... with a friend knowledgeable and wise” I added and continued: “Kowsar is right. I would have done the same thing if I were in his shoes. Remember? In Italy I called you for that international study on Venice... and for that very complex work on landscape, the city, and the history of territories that overlook Lake Garda from three different Italian Regions... I will always continue to call you if I have some worthy topic of study. I called you and will call you, exactly as one calls a friend... knowledgeable and wise. Hoping always that you’ll accept fostering my

work with your considerations,” I answered with no awkwardness. At that moment Mehdi Kowsar, in my heart, had become my brother.

I had visited Yazd more than once. And I continued to visit it each time my work in Persia gave me the opportunity to carve out a week to resume my travels in the history and the space of the civilization of our ancient world, fixing that city as one of my stable point in my itineraries. That is why I wanted to take up the theme that Ludovico had suddenly proposed a minute ago.” “You asked about Yazd...”

“Yazd, I believe,” resumed Ludovico, “is the synthesis of what you said a moment ago. What were Persian cities before the arrival of the Arabs? The capitals of the Sasasians? And of Parthia? Or of the Achaemenid? We know little, too little for them to stoke our imagination...”

“... our imagination and our projects?” I ventured...

“... our dreams,” corrected Ludovico, serious. He went on. “Even of Alexander’s Greek cities – or Eskandar’s as the Persians would say – and those of his successors we know very little. There is little left of them. Almost nothing. And those that still live, like Kandahar, have changed too much over time to be able to know something. We may imagine they were built similarly to those built in the Mediterranean. Seleucia-on-Tigris, of which we know the site and the plan, was traced on a regular fabric like Priene, the Ionian city. Bigger than Priene, certainly; Seleucia was an imperial city. And it had a theater, like all Greek cities, remember? When we visited Chandigarh we asked how far away the site of Ai-Khanoum was, where recently a Greek theater had been excavated of a city founded by Alexander or his successors. The museum director laughed at us. Ai-Khanoum was in Afghanistan. In the mountains. We knew that, we answered. We wanted to understand “geographically” the extent of the Hellenistic civilization in that part of the world. But Taxila, capital of the kingdom of Gandhara, not far from Chandigarh, must have certainly been a more interesting city than Seleucia-on-Tigri because it was more deeply blended with Greek institutions and Persian urban fabrics; a city where Eastern faces and Mediterranean voices populated the streets and the marketplaces; and the steady chant of Buddhist monks, dressed Greek style, with classic Persian words would have accompanied the rhythm of the chorus of Greek tragedies, recited by intrepid companies of actors from cities of Ionia...”

“In the British Museum in London – I wanted to add something too – in the Greek section I was intrigued by a silver coin, a tetradrachm I think, with the face of Demetrius the Invincible, great king of Gandhara, imprinted on it. A strong Greek profile, not idealized, rather realistic like a Roman portrait; and on his head a cap, what am I saying, a crown in the shape of the head of an elephant, with trunk and tusk. Demetrius, the Greek and Buddhist King of Taxila. And on the verso of the coin two small figures: Victory crowing Hero, like a classical Hellenistic coin.”

“Do you know that beautiful museum in Paris, Guimet Museum?” replied Ludovico; and in his somewhat pompous French added, “Musée national des arts asiatiques-Guimet.”

I confessed. “No, I don’t know it.”

“There are Buddhist portraits – continued Ludovico – that come just from Gandhara, clearly sculpted by Greek artists; extraordinary, hairdos and beards that seem fantastic to us, but in their feature one seems to find old Socrates – you’d like that, no? – or a Faun. And in one in particular, with long hair and short beard and mustache you can see the face of a Christ... very sweet gaze like the Turin Shroud.” He stopped for a moment, and then, “There, of those cities where Greeks became Buddhists, the monks dressed like Greeks, and unknown spiritualists prophesied a multi ethnic hereafter, we know nothing.”

“That infinite cultural and profane richness did not sufficiently fuse in a new unity – I felt I could conclude – and in the end, the Orient was separated once more from the West...”

“But the Arabs managed to unify the ancient world, at least that part which was richer in history and culture in those times.” Ludovico continued forcefully. “They managed by imposing a single, but poetic, lingua franca, Arabic; and a faith which at that time was as tolerant as the world could imagine. At least for the people of the «Book»; Jews, and Christians of all denominations. And their Universal Empire was so extended that it allowed not only merchants but also intellectuals to travel the entire civilized world with naturalness, from India to the Atlantic ocean, always accompanied by the rhythm of the time of prayer by the muezzin and the certainty that not only in Baghdad, but in every important capital city of a territory of strong dynastic or cultural identity, besides convenient “fondacos” often also communities of scholars and

libraries were eager to welcome whoever brought their own culture, tangible or intangible, to fuse with the others in the great crucible of the Universal Empire.” He stopped.

“Different times.” He added.

“Different times,” I repeated.

This time I resumed. “Certainly in those first centuries of Islam, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, music, and architecture...”

“... made the leaped forward that what remained of the West was unable to do – continued Ludovico immediately – and in this Eastern Renaissance, the Persians played a large role, perhaps a major role... do you know who Farabi is?”

Certainly, fortunately, I knew well. My mother, a musician passionate about the history of music and my father, professor of ancient literature, did not seldom cite that great figure of universal culture, a Persian born in Transoxiana, educated in Baghdad; for my mother he was the author of the book on music that established the principles of Arabic “tonality”. For my father, he was the philosopher that intended to found in a new philosophy the thinking of Plato and Aristotle. The Second Maestro, my father called him, citing Farabi’s contemporaries who meant, by First Maestro, Aristotle himself.

For a few minutes, concisely, exhibiting in ill-concealed competition our unassuaged passions. Ludovico and I leafed through all the pages that memory placed at our disposal in the chapter regarding the great cultural and scientific, eastern and western forge of the ancient Universal Empire of Islam. We calmed down a bit, took another sip of red, and Ludovico, finally, got back to the point; to Yazd.

“You see – he told me – just as the Aristotle’s and Plato’s texts in the Arabic Empire, traveled from the West to the Orient while the decimal digits, the intuition of the “zero”, and the algorithms of Khwārezmi, the great Persian of Chorasmia, traveled in the opposite direction, from the East to the West together with the lute – yes the Persian *ūd* – ancestor to modern stringed instruments – so the architectonic principles of the West, the conquered spatiality of the vaults and the accomplished constructive Byzantine lightness conquered the Orient. The encounter occurred in Jerusalem. So I like to think. There is no more symbolic city for this... baptismal marriage between the architecture of the West and that of the Orient.” And he laughed louder. It must have been something

he thought about often. But I knew what he was leading up to.

“The Dome of the Rock...” I commented.

“The Dome of the Rock,” he confirmed. And he continued. “That is certainly not exactly how it went. In that monumental encounter and collision of cultures, every protagonist, famous or unknown, gave his contribution, seized a secret from the other culture, and made an innovative use of it and, at the same time, a symbolic display. But the idea that the first “modern” dome built by the new Universal Empire was precisely the one raised in Jerusalem in the esplanade of the Temple in competition with that of the Holy Sepulcher, that looks out at it from the facing hill, and that it was built by Byzantine architects, perhaps already converted, if not to the religion then to the nascent strength of the Empire, I must confess, fascinates me. I admit it is a symbolic thought, not philological at all...”

“There is a little bit of philology, though...” This time I laughed.

“But what interests me – Ludovico continued without hesitating – is not so much the extraordinary, vertiginous research, essentially Persian, albeit Islamic, on the spatial possibilities of the vaulted space...”

“Yes, – I forcibly stepped in his discourse. What interested me, instead, was precisely that «vertiginous research» – “Yes, – I stubbornly persisted – that running start of the squinch arcs domes of the Palace of Ardashir, Sassanid King of Kings, to graft it onto the idea of the ogival Eiwans of Ctesiphon, the previous Parthian capital, generating the idea of the great courtyard with four exhedra Eiwans, open in noble palaces and in sacred enclosures, transforming the heaviness of Sassanid stone architecture into the immaterial levity – yes, I must have said *levity*, but with a smile, as was fitting – the immaterial levity of the internal space of the Selgiughid, then Ilkanide, and finally Safavid periods, adopting, developing, overcoming, and in the end forgetting the Byzantine technique, all this, I must confess, overwhelms me and enchants me, Ludovico. In Esfahan, remember? We have already talked about it when we walked the entire day between the Friday Mosque and the smaller Mosque of the Princesses. The great ancient Mosque, we agreed last time, is the triumph of an idea of architecture as an ever variable infinite space, for which *interior* and *exterior* are only adjectives of the ever varying continuity of lights and shadows. The small Mosque of the Princesses, almost hidden in the wall of the great imperial square,

can be reached almost accidentally following an itinerary bereft of any rhetoric that would guide you to its spatial core to discover that the maximum Persian architectural virtuosity was achieved right there, in that most simple octagonal hall covered by a weightless cupola with no exhibition, whose beauty cannot be defined with sophisticated adjectives, but only contemplated within the inner peace miraculously reached in her bosom.”

“There – Ludovico stopped me authoritatively – everything you said about Persian monumental architecture is identically present in the fabric of the Islamic city of Persia, in Yazd, for example. Precisely the *absolute continuity* between the values of space – composed of many shadows and some sudden lights – hidden in the normal fabric of the city and the value of the collective spaces, sacred, but no more symbolic than the private ones, is what attracts me more forcefully to recognize in the Persian city, ancient and yet alive – like Yazd – not only the precious heritage of a culture to which we ourselves must feel we belong, but also the prophecy – if you’d rather not say vision – of the future city. Of the future city which I can imagine, but I would like to be able to design it in its entirety and in all its always variable details, together with you, together with all of you, my friends and companions in this voyage.” He stopped, and then, “which is always a voyage in search of the last city.”

The last city. I was happy that at this point the steward alerted us of the imminent landing. By now there was little left to say. The hostess came by quickly to retrieve the tray with chalices and the already empty bottle, checking with professional glances to ensure that we had raised the backrest and fastened our seat belts. Below us glimmered the Sea of Marmara. Even if I was not near a window I searched to view the domes of Istanbul. Ludovico said, “While we were talking we passed over Izmir, Smyrna I mean. The airplane has widened its course westward once more. I think we are due for a bumpy landing..”

“Izmir – I said as if to myself – Smyrna; I’ve never been there.”

“Do you think present Izmir may be interesting?” Ludovico asked me. “I don’t know, but it is the last city that I missed in the chain of cities connecting the Orient and the West between which the Persian Letters by Montesquieu come and go. When I read them, of that chain I knew only Venice, and a little bit – only a little – Paris. I tried to imagine what

Esfahan was like, from which Montesquieu's Persians had left. When I read the Persian Letters I was young. A boy. I was truly happy when I visited Esfahan for the first time. Its beauty helped me understand the thread that Montesquieu wanted to weave between the Orient and the West could not but start from there, from that city..."

"... and could not touch the West other than at Venice, the last city of the Orient," concluded Ludovico.

Ludovico. Many years have gone by since that trip to Constantinople. Yes, I obstinately continue calling Constantinople the city everyone knows as Istanbul; the same way, in our dialogues, Iran we obstinately called "Persia", even if the name Iran is more ancient than Persia, I believe. The ancients and the Byzantines, the men of the Enlightenment – writers and philosophers – and the travelers have established what would be and how to call the East of which our land, Europe, is the West. But mainly, I believe, it was determined by the Greeks. I wrote that in the first few lines: when at seventeen, I studied and translated with great labor a small part of "The Persians" by Aeschylus, I expected to find words of patriotic exaltation, triumph, and ethnic disdain. Instead, I found words of anguish, pain, religious fears of the divinity by whose wish everyone, Greeks and Persians, despite being enemies, had to feel equally submissive. And I thought that the but few Athenian women allowed to witness the tragedy, instead of hating Atossa, Xerxes' elderly mother, identified themselves in her torment upon learning of the defeat at Salamis and not knowing the fate of her son; and that the men of Athens, so often tempted by the hubris of absolute superiority, must have meditated on themselves at the appearance of the King of Kings vanquished, clothes rent, repentant and defeated. I tried to understand what Pericles expected from Aeschylus' tragedy and whether my thoughts were, instead, misleading being conditioned by a Christian sense of human brotherhood unknown to the Greeks. Nevertheless, even in the uncertainty of my youthful interpretation, I seemed to have learned that, in any case, it was quite natural for a Greek poet to attribute to the most fearsome enemy the same dramatically human sentiments that certainly moved the spirit of those they considered the best among mortals, the Greeks, fellow-citizens, precisely. So I thought I had learned – it was the first time

– that that world of heroisms and deceits, of exaltation and violence, of opposite sentiments of supremacy, of clash between civilizations presented to us in our schoolbooks, in reality, was a world of recognized, equal, painful caducity, definite sign of a shared human condition. With Ludovico, I never spoke of Aeschylus, or at least I never remember having done so. Certainly, sometimes I spoke to him of Pericles, but in academic terms, to talk of the architecture of the Parthenon, Ictinus and Kallikrates, and the Temple of Apollo in Bassae. However I soon observed, in our Persian conversations, how much he sought almost anxiously to attain complete comprehension – what am I saying? – a complete self-identification into the Persian world, ancient and present world, distant yet mysteriously consonant with ours. So much so that one would imagine that for him the reappearance in his life of his old Persian students that had called him to join them in their world, would have had the same benevolent, reassuring, and luminous effect that in Homeric poems has the apparition of the saving deity in the form of – could be – a youthful Hermes indicating the door to liberty, or Calypso weaving a well deserved pause of forgetfulness. In reality, Quaroni's pessimistic and sorrowful character, Ludovico's I mean, rendered him perfectly aware of the limits of the joy achieved in the ecstatic serenity of the journey. So that it seemed to me that there, in Persia in the moments of rest, of vacation from the welcome commitments, he wanted to consume in the conversation the nostalgia of a present that was inexorably fleeting. But in the same way – and for the same reasons – he was perfectly aware that the world in which he and I, for different reasons, would meet from time to time, and that we could have lived even only aesthetically – as does any intelligent explorer of exotic realities – in truth attracted us because we felt in it the same soft warmth and authoritarian threats with which the world we were born in, embraces and wounds us. One evening, in Tehran, while we continued our dialogue I asked both him and myself what role the Persian journey had for each of us. I don't remember what I replied to myself; certainly, something that added nothing to the many words expressed in the previous conversations. When it was Ludovico's turn, "If I must say why I love being in these places – he began slowly – besides the intellectual curiosity, the passion for the research on ancient and modern cities I would not know how to say anything. Platitudes.

But surely, if I were to live here for the rest of my life, I would write high up, on the walls of my room, in one continuous and repeated line all around the perimeter of the ceiling, in clear letters, a sentence: like us, more than us, like us, more than us, like us, more than us...” “...more than us?” I asked “Yes – he answered – for better or for worse.”

For better or for worse. After that trip to Constantinople with Ludovico, I really got to know Mehdi Kowsar. With him, I saw Silvana Manco again, even cleverer than I remembered her. We became true friends, as rarely happens among adults. And I participated, as much as I could, at the alternating fortune – for better and for worse – in their voyage between Orient and the West, splendid and dramatic, but victorious. And when my Italian friends mention Mehdi Kowsar – who for many years has been with his wife Silvana an essential part of my story as an architect – they say “your Persian friend” as Ludovico Quaroni would say. This makes me happy: to have as a friend a true Persian architect is an honor. And in conversations with him today it is as if resume living the ideas and words with which Ludovico Quaroni and I tried to unravel and understand the Orient that lives in us westerners. Mehdi, as my Second Maestro, leads me by hand in the poetry of his land and continues to lead me on the road shown me by Ludovico Quaroni, towards understanding the future city through the study of the Persian city. With the clear purpose that he may talk to other architects, other scholars, and other learned men with his words and the typical instruments of the scholar and architect, we have asked him to publish in the pages of our journal his interpretation of Yazd, his Plan of the city. Which, as always, is a collective project, to which, under his direction, other planners have participated; among which an Italian of rare culture, then young, Ludovico Micara, he also a former pupil of Ludovico Quaroni, he also architect in a permanent dialogue with his Orient.

Mehdi Kowsar has accepted our invitation. We are honored. And here I thank him in the name of all of us.