

## FOREWORD

**N**ORTH AFRICA lies at the intersection, or rather on the periphery, of continents, geographical zones and cultures, thus it is a very significant and particular region of the world. Despite the fact that it belongs to Africa geographically, it diverges from the central and southern part of the continent (known as the Tropic Africa), especially as far as its culture is concerned. As the southern fringe of the Mediterranean, it has played for centuries a very important role in the history of different civilizations (e.g. Islam, and both Western and Eastern Christianity).

North Africa has been assimilated into the Arab world, into the Islam civilization, or possibly it is more correct to say that it is a sub-culture of the Islam. The majority of the countries situated in this area belong to the Western Arabic world, to the Maghreb ('where the sun sets'). Usually three members are classified as central Maghreb countries: Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia; and they are complemented by a fourth, Libya. In 1989, the four Maghreb states joined by Mauritania founded a regional economic cooperation, the Arab Maghreb Union. However, the members have had serious conflicts from the beginning, especially because of the controversial possession of the rich phosphate deposits in the Western Sahara.

Due to historical circumstances, a very complex and special culture has developed in the Maghreb. In the Middle Ages, the term had a wider meaning: it included not only North Africa, but those parts of Southern Europe as well which were under Muslim control for centuries (like Iberia or Southern Andalusia, and Southern Italy). The inhabitants of the Maghreb territories, who were in fact of mixed Berber-Arab origin, were widely known as the Moors. Later the Maghreb became part of the Osman Empire; and in the early 20th century it was colonized by France acquiring the special francophone character which still lasts today.

Although Egypt is situated in North Africa as well, it is usually not classified into the Maghreb; instead, it is defined as a Near Eastern country. Indeed, Egypt diverges from the other countries of the region to a great extent. Its historical development was very specific: the geographic characteristics of the Nile valley resulted in the evolution of a potamic civilization thousands of years ago.

Even nowadays North Africa has a great geo-strategic importance from European or Western point of view, as it lies in the 'neighbourhood' of Europe. Due to the proximity, the events happening in North Africa directly influence the Continent. In the last years, the Southern Mediterranean has meant a serious safety risk factor, partly because of the migration from this area towards Europe, and partly because of the political instability. Since the year of the Arab Spring, the revolutionary wave spreading from Tunisia has affected all countries of the Maghreb region and increased its instability. Hence, it seems evident that both the European Union and the NATO emphasise the importance of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Mediterranean Dialogue.

The present thematic issue of the *Belvedere Meridionale* publishes a great variety of studies discussing historical and contemporary political questions related to North Africa and the five countries of this region. The reader will encounter a great number of references to Hungarian people, therefore it may be concluded that Hungarians have also contributed to the scientific, cultural and economic development of North Africa.