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On the cover: Pietro Vesconte, *Nautical Chart*, 1311. Courtesy of Florence State Archive.

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Conflicts, Equilibria, Hegemonies: the Case for Catalan-Aragonese Expansion as a Starting Point in Late Medieval Mediterranean Studies Based on a Survey of Recent Scholarship

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1. The Mediterranean in 20th-Century Medieval Studies

The broken Mediterranean of Henri Pirenne

In the 1920s, the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne proposed an influential thesis: the spread of Islam across the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean and the end of political, economic and cultural unity in the ancient Mediterranean world “made” the European Middle Ages. Pirenne famously concluded that the “lack” of a cohesive Mediterranean shaped the Medieval West as a continental civilization that differed radically from the ancient, Mediterranean-centered world of the Romans; “feudalism” and the agrarian economy of the Early Middle Ages in Europe emerged in response to the new power of Islam in the Mediterranean (Pirenne, 1987).

Although strongly criticized, the core of the Pirenne thesis remains alive today, and continues to shape contemporary scholarship on Medieval Mediterranean history. Indeed, in accord with Pirenne’s thesis, the Great Sea is still frequently conceived as a moving and permeable border between two allegedly distinct, yet interdependent civilizations (Havighurst, 1958; Lopez, 1945; Petralia, 1995). Nevertheless, since Pirenne’s publication, several generations of scholars have transformed our understanding of the Mediterranean’s apparent divisions against a backdrop of cross-cultural interconnectivity. This essay surveys developments in the study of the late Medieval Mediterranean world and concludes by advancing a new research agenda for future scholarship on this dynamic period through the lens of Southern Italy.

The Crusaders’ Mediterranean

For many years, British, French and American historians in particular, saw Europe’s Christian crusaders as protagonists in Mediterranean history (Riley Smith, 1977; Riley Smith, 1981). According to this interpretive paradigm, the crusading Christian knights were a major catalyst behind the growing power of the West during the late Medieval Era. As the seminal “event” of the period, the Crusades are alleged to have established an enduring frontier between Christendom

and the Islamic worlds and to have provided a consequential stimulus for Western economic penetration into Eastern routes and markets. Recent historiography has, however, recognized the limited duration of the crusader states in the Levant and questioned the role the Crusades played in creating a period of Western hegemony over Eastern markets. The new research on this topic has focused on understanding the meaning and significance of the Crusades for European society; the importance of Eastern science, technology and tools of warfare for Early Modern Europe; and the rallying of Christendom around the Papacy during this dynamic period in Europe's past (Cahen, 1992; Riley Smith, 2003).

The scenery of the "Commercial Revolution" (R.S. Lopez)

In the 1960s, beginning with his seminal study of the Genoese notarial archives, Roberto Sabatino Lopez reconstructed a narrative of Western economic growth based upon the powerful commercial economies of great Italian cities (Lopez & Raymond, 1955; Lopez, 1971). According to Lopez, Genoa, Venice and Pisa led the dramatic growth of long-distance commerce and military control of Mediterranean trade routes by Western Europeans. The emphasis placed by Lopez (1971) on the role of Italian merchants confirmed and enhanced Pirenne's earlier statement that the 11th century was a turning point in Western history, while also recognizing, to a greater extent than Pirenne, the importance of West-East commerce in the Medieval Mediterranean.

Lopez's work marks the peak of a historiographical trend that focused attention on the Genoese or Venetian colonies in the East and on the origins of an economic dualism between Northern and Southern Europe. However, as subsequent scholars recognized, a framework built by these studies remains incomplete if we do not consider the political side of the Mediterranean's history (Goitein, 1967-93; Lane, 1973; Ashtor, 1982; Abulafia, 1994; Lopez, 1996). In what follows, I offer a critical survey of a countervailing tradition in the historiography by surveying a body of scholarly works that foregrounds the importance of politics in the history of the people and places that border the Mediterranean Sea.

The Mediterranean of political struggles (D. Abulafia)

In 1997, D. Abulafia dedicated an important book to the "struggle for dominion" over the Mediterranean region in the Late Middle Ages (Abulafia, 1997). For the first time since Michele Amari's work of 1848, Abulafia acknowledged the war between the Crown of Aragon, the Angevins of Naples and the Kingdom of Sicily as a critical event in late Medieval Mediterranean politics. Abulafia's political and military perspective in the text, far from putting aside the economic and commercial features of Mediterranean history, focuses on the central role played by these powerful late Medieval kingdoms in shaping the Sea's hegemonies.

The Mediterranean in the “Making of Europe” (R. Bartlett)

The Medieval Mediterranean also appears as the protagonist in one of the most impressive and original studies of an even broader subject: the development of Europe’s modern borders.

In 1994, R. Bartlett published *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization, Cultural Change. 950-1350*. This book posits that the origins of current European geography are to be found in a great demographic increase combined with the “colonization” of North-Eastern and Southern European lands through military and economic strategies by a “post-Carolingian core” of nobles, bishops and free farmers. Within this context, the Spanish *Reconquista*, the Norman conquest of Southern Italy, the Crusades and the aggressive commercial initiatives of Italian merchants on the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean routes all played critical roles. The renewed bond between continental Europe and the Mediterranean world appears here as one - maybe the most important - of the stones on which modern European society was built.

Beyond the Middle Ages: the Mediterranean as a “world” (F. Braudel)

Much like Pirenne’s foundational work on this topic, Braudel’s seminal studies on the Mediterranean world need not be discussed at length. Beginning with the region’s political history, Braudel later widened his purview to investigate all aspects of Mediterranean civilizations. For Braudel, the geographical features of the Mediterranean, as well as some lasting economic phenomena, helped to establish what he called the *long durée* characteristics of the history of the Mediterranean world. These characteristics included: the borders between arid and temperate lands; the chains of islands that allow safe navigation; the permanent shape of the navigation routes; the role of the seaports; and the region’s relations with outer economies. After Braudel, historians of the Mediterranean could no longer ignore these features (Braudel, 1949; Braudel, 1987).

Since the publication of Braudel’s works, the Mediterranean world has been the subject of a wide range of interdisciplinary studies, both historical and anthropological, which have stressed the Medieval Era as a turning point in its history (Horden, Purcell, 2000; Abulafia, 2003; Abulafia, 2011; Guarracino, 2007; Benigno, 2013).

2. A late Medieval Mediterranean protagonist: the Crown of Aragon

The Crown of Aragon

Since the mid-20th century, a rich Spanish and Italian historiography has analyzed the so-called “Aragonese-Catalan expansion in the Mediterranean”. Surprisingly, this important subject has been neglected by mainstream Medieval Studies. In the second part of this paper, I have chosen to focus on the history of the Crown of Aragon because I contend that this subject shows, better than many

others, how commerce and military-political trends shaped late Medieval Mediterranean history. Specifically, I argue that at the end of the 13th century, a new political, military and economic power appeared in the Mediterranean, changing the equilibria among the sovereigns acting in that area. From the conquest of Sicily by the king of Aragon in 1283 to the reign of Alfonso the Magnanimous, the Papacy, as well as both the primary Mediterranean commercial forces of Venice, Genoa and Florence and the less influential Mediterranean kingdoms, had to face an unexpected and unbowed competitor.

The Crown of Aragon: from a small Iberian kingdom to a powerful Mediterranean multi-state (12th-13th centuries)

The so-called “Crown of Aragon” was created from the dominions of Ramiro the Monk, Count of Barcelona, who became king of Aragon by marriage in 1136. From that point forward, the Kingdom became a major figure in the *Reconquista*. In fact, the expansion on Muslim lands affected the Mediterranean coast of the Peninsula and islands, generating different kingdoms (Valencia, Mallorca) ruled by the same king (Sesma Muñoz, 2000).

In the early 13th century, the King of Aragon’s efforts to expand his dominion towards Southern France were frustrated. In response, his foreign policy looked towards the closer Mediterranean islands. This shift in policy occurred in part because the main social and economic power of the Kingdom was composed of the vibrant merchant class of Barcelona, Majorca and Perpignan, who, for many decades, maintained close commercial relations with the North-West African coast.

In 1282, the rebellion of Sicily against Charles of Anjou gave Peter of Aragon the opportunity to take the Crown of the island’s ancient kingdom. This was the first step in an expansion policy that would follow the “*ruta de las islas*” (the route of islands) towards the Eastern Mediterranean; this route matched the “*ruta de las especias*” (spice route), and promised to open the rich Eastern markets to Catalan commerce (Del Treppo, 1972). Although countered by the Pope, the Italian merchant cities and the Anjou established a well-built dominion on Sicily and Greece—regions where they built bases of operation that supported the merchants’ expanding activities in the wealthy seaports of the East.

Towards the Mediterranean “Imperi” of Alphonse the Magnanimous (14th-15th centuries)

In the early years of the 13th century, James of Aragon, who had been appointed Church Admiral by the Pope, proclaimed his plan for expansion, “We work to follow our route towards the East”. This was the first overt statement of a military and political program that would guide Aragonese-Catalan foreign policy for over two centuries. After a temporary halt in the 14th century, the program was re-adopted by King Alfonso the Magnanimous. Following this policy led the Crown of Aragon to control the Kingdom of Naples; support Greek and Albanian resistance against Ottomans in the Balkans; and attempt to wrest control of the Kingdom of Hungary.

These actions reflect the King's expansionist aims in the name of Empire, and indeed, the word "Imperi" (Empire) appears frequently in the King's political lexicon (Hillgarth, 1975; Ryder, 1992; Ferrer & Mutgé, 2005; Sabaté, 2017).

Notably, the structure of a multi-state monarchy allowed the King to maintain the fidelity of his dominions, preserve local laws and constitutional buildings, and rely on the varied resources of diverse lands (Gonzalez Antón, 1989). From this perspective, it is clear that Alfonso planned a kind of "Mediterranean commonwealth", in which the Crown would be the center of an economic policy that would add value to the Kingdom's resources through exchange (Del Treppo, 1978).

The Crown of Aragon as a Mediterranean network: immigration and repopulation

The early assimilation of the Mediterranean countries into Aragonese domains formed the groundwork on which the later Spanish Monarchy could found its Empire. The Aragonese-Catalan expansion in Sicily, Sardinia, and Southern Italy (and also temporarily Greece) heavily affected the societies of these countries. For example, after the *Reconquista*, Islamic lands in Iberia were heavily repopulated by both the Aragonese and the Catalans. Sardinia too was settled by Catalan merchants, soldiers, nobles and officers who often intermarried with the local women. More populated and wealthy, Sicily experienced a strong immigration of Iberian nobles at the same time that a tight network of merchant communities spread throughout the towns of the island, often becoming part of the ruling class.

Moreover, in Sicily and the Kingdom of Naples, a great number of officers came from Spain to serve the King and, in many cases, they became citizens of Italian towns. The prevalence of Catalan - or generally Spanish - names in Southern Italy, Sardinia and Sicily today attests to the intermarriage between Iberians and natives during this period (Corrao, 1991).

The Crown of Aragon as a Mediterranean network: merchants and ship owners

Although shifting continuously over time, the activities of the Catalan merchants generated a vibrant network of trade throughout the Mediterranean. Their early activities were bolstered by the King of Aragon's conquest of the Balearic islands in the early 13th century, but the "Great Leap Forward" for the Aragonese came with the integration of Sicily, the central Mediterranean island, into the Catalan-Aragonese dominion. From the seaports of Sicily, where Catalans were given privileges and built a network of consulates, they began traveling the Eastern maritime routes towards Syria, Cyprus, Crete and Constantinople, and challenging the strength of their rivals, the Italian merchant cities (Del Treppo, 1972; Abulafia, 1994; Ferrer & Coulon, 1999; Ferrer, 2003; Coulon, 2004). Very often, merchants were both businessmen and royal ambassadors or spies, and their activities were eased by the privileges that they obtained in the Crown's dominions or by the treaties that kings made with both Christian and Islamic foreign states (Dufourcq, 1966). In addition, a crowd of small and large ship builders and ship owners provided services to merchants from all nations. From the great *Atarazanas*

(Arsenal) in Barcelona to the smaller shipyards on the Catalan coast, the facilities offered irreplaceable aid to Mediterranean sea traffic and strong support for the policy of the king (Del Treppo, 1972).

The wars fought by the Crown against the Genoese in the 14th century and against the Florentines in the 15th century have their roots in the commercial competitions that developed between Catalan and Italian merchants during the formative years of Aragonese overseas expansion.

The circulation of constitutional models

The Crown of Aragon provided a framework for the continuous exchange of models of government: by copying and borrowing single institutions or offices, aspects of the constitutional structures of the different kingdoms were slowly, but effectively spread throughout the vast Aragon domains. For instance, the King's court adopted the model of the Papal Chancery, which had been the root of a similar Sicilian office; the Kingdom also imported the long Sicilian tradition of a central office to control accounts; and Sicily itself created another central financial office on a model imported from Castile (D'Agostino, 2000; Corrao, 2005).

Perhaps the most important cases of assimilation are those of the Viceroy and the Parliament. In the 13th century, Sicily adopted the Iberian parliamentary system (the *Cortes*), which was later brought to the Neapolitan kingdom. Sicily, the Crown's first dominion outside the Iberian peninsula, also became the grounds for experimenting with the Vice-royal system: stemming from the Iberian tradition of delegating royal powers, it offered a method for ruling any "foreign" country under the Aragon, and even provided the basis on which the vice-royal system was developed in the New World under the Spanish Empire.

3. Final remarks

Through a historiographical survey of a few key texts and a small "case study", I have tried to represent a late Medieval history of the rich Mediterranean world, a domain comprised of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, merchants and spices, kingdoms and maritime republics. I find the region's deepest meaning in the long-lasting interactions between its various elements. I hope that the flourishing of new studies about the Catalan-Aragonese expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean will add new tiles to the complex mosaic that is the late Medieval Mediterranean world.

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