

## **The Problem of shifting dynamics in Medieval Trade: The Western Mediterranean**

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Long-distance trade was a significant feature of the medieval Mediterranean. This type of trade has always been a favourite research field of medievalists. But only now we can witness an explosion of interest in the so called Mediterranean Studies, which appears strangely belated.<sup>1</sup> For a long time, the focus of research rested alone on the histories of the Levant trade of several Italian cities.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these factors, the Mediterranean did not benefit from the interdisciplinary approaches other regions enjoyed. But thanks to a growing awareness of the intercultural nature of the Mediterranean Sea<sup>3</sup>, researchers have broadened the discourse of research. There are now numerous examples of studies dealing with the Mediterranean trade of North Africa, Byzantium or the Middle East.

But such an approach has omitted one crucial aspect investigating the medieval long-distance trade: the way local interactions between merchants of different origin and smaller port cities preceded the development of the long-distant luxury trade in the western Mediterranean. The view, that Provençal and Catalan Merchants started trading with the Levant in the wake of the Italian merchants by learning and copying their genuine commercial methods is outdated.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than starting my research about the long-distant trade between Syria and the Western Mediterranean with the crusades, trade contracts or privileges and trying to describe the quantity and aftermath of this business around these sources, I start from an earlier vantage point.<sup>5</sup> The study of exchange has been dominated by the analysis of written sources connected with the luxury trade. There are countless surveys about Italian Traders in the Levant and the picture of Venetian galleys loaded with oriental spices and luxury goods is a common one. Written sources tell us most about luxuries but far less about other goods.

### *Long-distant vs. short-distant trade*

My thesis is that foremost the economically crucial level of bulk exchange (olive oil, fish, grain, wood, wool, etc.) was an important factor for the development of long-distant trade. Only by obtaining a certain degree of capital through short-distance trade, merchants do show interest in putting their money in handsome, but risk-entailing, trade with the Levant. The Western Mediterranean, where several trading cities – like Marseille, Genoa, Montpellier, Barcelona, Nîmes to name but a few – were involved in the maritime trade, serves well for such a study.

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<sup>1</sup> John Watkins, The new Mediterranean Studies: A Mediator between Area Studies and Global Studies, in: *Mediterranean Studies* 21/2 (2013), 149.

<sup>2</sup> Adolf Schaube's *Handelsgeschichte* is despite its age and a few outdated facts still a very profound work about the Mediterranean Trade. Adolf Schaube, *Handelsgeschichte der romanischen Völker des Mittelmeergebiets bis zum Ende der Kreuzzüge*, München 1906.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Rahel Oesterle, *Das Mittelmeer und die Mittelmeerwelt. Annäherungen an einen <Gegenstand der Geschichte> in der neueren deutschen Mediävistik*, in: Rania Abdellatif (Ed.), *Construire la Méditerranée, penser les transferts culturels*, München 2012, 788.

<sup>4</sup> David Abulafia, *Marseille, Acre and the Mediterranean, 1200-1291*, in: Peter W. Edbury, David M. Metcalf (Ed.), *Coinage in the Latin East. The Fourth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History*, Oxford 1980, 19-39.

<sup>5</sup> For a similar approach see Abu-Lughod. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony. The world system A.D. 1250-1350*, New York 1991, 13.

Therefore we can observe the following points: On the one hand that there is a disproportionately high focus on long-distant trade, especially in connection with luxury goods. And on the other hand that research has mostly specialised on a small group of (Italian) port cities. Both factors narrow the perspective of research about the Western Mediterranean. My intention is to argue for a primacy of internal causal factors to this region when studying economic change, rather than stressing long-distance relationships as the most important field of research.<sup>6</sup>

### *Shifting Dynamics in Medieval Trade*

In the Western Mediterranean we find what Braudel following Haëpke named an “archipelago of towns”.<sup>7</sup> By that he meant a region, where a variety of different social formations coexisted. There were trading hubs, port cities and monetized trading centres as well as agricultural regions and isolated valleys. This region was characterised by a high degree of internal economic interdependence. The interactive environment of the Western Mediterranean is expressed through the vocabulary of *microecology*.<sup>8</sup> One feature of this concept is that such (trade-) networks are fluid and resist strict mapping. Merchants from one city traded in a second city and acted as intermediaries for trade in a third one.

Like today, identities in the Mediterranean world were complex and multifaceted in the Middle Ages. Tradesmen borrowed and shifted identities according to their needs. Some of them were sailors and money changers, others were pirates or originated from the city nobility. But of all them shared a common multicultural attitude: medieval seagoers needed to maneuver within different cultural settings with different ethnicities and unfamiliar languages.<sup>9</sup> Therefore it was necessary to shift identities accordingly to the occasion required. Citizens of the Mediterranean coast and their hinterland were not prudish to adopt or forge new identities. To capitalize on the privileges of the most important maritime trading cities, merchants from the so called *minor trading nations*<sup>10</sup> in the western Mediterranean basin were eager to sail under the flags of other polities. Tradesmen from Marseille, Montpellier and other Provençal towns adopted another identity, passing themselves off as Pisans or Genoese in North Africa and the Levant.

### *Privileges granted „pro omnibus qui Pisano nomine censentur“<sup>11</sup>*

This phrase originates from a case record dating back to 1245. A witness named *Ildebrandus Coni* stated in front of the court, that the Pisan Privileges in the Levant applied for everyone, who sailed under their flag and thus becoming subject to Pisan law.<sup>12</sup> There was a commercial advantage behind this strategy. Merchants of Marseille travelled under the flag of the Pisans, the merchants of Montpellier did the same later with Marseille and Genoa. The practice of

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<sup>6</sup> For a similar methodological approach see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400 – 800*, Oxford 2007 (Repr.), 819.

<sup>7</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization & Capitalism, 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Vol. III. *The Perspective of the World*, London/New York 1984, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Peregrine Horden, Nichols Purcell, *The Mediterranean and „the New Thalassology“*, in: *The American Historical Review*, Vol 111/3 (2006), 732-733.

<sup>9</sup> Kathryn Reyerson, *Identity in the Medieval Mediterranean World of Merchants and Pirates*, in: *Mediterranean Studies* 20/2 (2012), 129-146

<sup>10</sup> Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levante Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1983.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Davidsohn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte von Florenz. Zweiter Theil: Aus den Urkunden und Stadtbüchern von San Gimignano (13. und 14. Jahrhundert)*, Berlin 1900, 298.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Eberhard Mayer, *Marseilles Levantehandel und ein akkonensisches Fälscheratelier des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1972, 65-66.

borrowing identity seems quite common and we have countless examples of it. But that raises a problem for historians and economists: how can we provide evidence if one merchant belongs to one city or another and how can we quantify this trade?

The answer is as disappointing as simple: we have to stop thinking in categories of “self” and “foreign”. The typical medieval merchant identified with his (or in some cases her) place of origin, such as a city-state or a *pays*.<sup>13</sup> Beyond that, there was much ambiguity. There was no such thing as modern patriotism. Who today can tell how colonists from one city felt after living for several years in a colony or how Pisan merchants born in Sicily defined themselves?<sup>14</sup> The answer can only be given through the careful study of primary sources.

### *A multi-layered analysis of shifting dynamics in trade*

In order to pinpoint the shifting dynamics of medieval trade it is necessary to implement a multi-layered analysis, covering both the field of the economic relation between the merchants as well as the exchange between cities. This allows describing the economic development of trade better than any town history, which fails to pay tribute to the “*multilayered, multivalent, and composite*” identity of the Mediterranean.<sup>15</sup> Therefore an *actor-based perspective* seems adequate to describe the trade network in the Western Mediterranean.

The emerging long-trade between the Provencal coast and the Syria in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century suggests that the political and social entanglement of medieval merchants and port cities were far more complex than assumed. Merchants chose their trading towns according to the political and economical situation and have not been very backward in changing their patterns of trade. As we have seen in the case of the merchants of Marseille and Montpellier the key variable in assessing their maritime trade is its *connectivity*.<sup>16</sup> On the first view it looks like the trade network of port cities like Marseille, Montpellier, Nîmes or St. Gilles was of moderate size. But the simple lack of documentation should not lead to the conclusion that these cities were of no importance to medieval trade. This acts as a salutary reminder to take the history of *smaller trading nations* seriously. The same applies to the understanding of the ill documented bulk exchange, which often lags behind research about luxury goods.

As indicated earlier, these structures had received little attention so far. With this approach, focussing on the dynamics of maritime trade in the Western Mediterranean, I hope to shed light on the economy in medieval trade and the complex relations and the dynamics behind it.

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<sup>13</sup> The *pays* was mostly defined by language.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the case of the merchants of Messina see David Abulafia, *The merchants of Messina: Levant trade and domestic economy*, in: David Abulafia, *Commerce and Conquest in the Mediterranean 1100-1500*, London 1993, XII 196-212.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity and Co-existence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Baltimore 2006, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Peregrine Horden, Nichols Purcell, *The Mediterranean and „the New Thalassology“*, in: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 111/3 (2006), 733.