

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

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Introduction

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.¹ For a long time, the focus of research rested on the histories of the Levant trade of several Italian cities.² 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 Sea³, 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-distance 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with the Levant in the wake of the Italian merchants by learning and copying their genuine commercial methods is outdated.⁴

Maybe it is best expressed in the words of Archibald Lewis: *“First of all it must be understood that most commerce which made use of the Mediterranean and Black Seas – perhaps as much as 90 percent of it – always consisted of bulk commodities like wheat, olive oil, fish, and other foodstuffs or salt, timber, metals, wool, and hides. Finished wares, luxury goods, and high-priced commodities like spices, though very valuable, were always only the frosting on the maritime commercial cake.”*⁵

The preoccupation with the long-distance trade has raised many unanswered questions. It is undisputedly that the rapid growth of trade in the 12th and 13th century has been in-depth studied in connection with the Italian towns, notably Venice, Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi.⁶ But

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

² Adolf Schaube's *Handelsgeschichte* is despite its age and a few outdated facts still a very profound work about the Mediterranean Trade.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.

³ 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, 78.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Archibald Lewis, *Mediterranean Commerce. A.D. 300-1100 Shipping and Trade*, in: *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano sull'alto Medioevo* 25. *La navigazione mediterranea nell'alto Medioevo* 2, Spoleto 1978, 481f.

⁶ The amount of literature dealing with any of these four cities can't be enumerated. An overview article from 2005 gives a slight insight in the basic literature dealing with them. John Morrissey, *Die italienischen*

what all these studies lack is a clear focus on both short-distance trade (along the coast) and non-Italian merchants participating in maritime trade. Like all narratives, historiography is the product of a certain point of view and only partly reflects medieval trade from a holistic perspective.

Rather than starting my research about the long-distance 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.⁷ 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 dealing in high-priced commodities like spices. Written sources tell us most about luxuries but far less about other goods. These problems do not just distort the image of medieval trade but are real problems for modern historiography, since they neglect the poorer documented spheres of economic life.

Therefore, 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-distance trade. Only by obtaining a certain degree of capital through short-distance trade, merchants do show interest in putting their money in profit promising, 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. Instead of highlighting once more the remarkable growth of the long-distance trade of the Italian city states in the middle ages, I try to shed light on regions often neglected: Provence, Languedoc and parts of Catalonia, stretching from the French-Italian border in the east to the Pyrenees in the west.

*State of the Art*⁸

These regions, that are part of *le Midi*⁹, serve particularly well for a study about the emerging long-distance trade. The striking characteristic of the cities in Languedoc, Provence and Catalonia was their collaborative nature.¹⁰ There was no single city that could establish a clear predominance in the trade between the western Mediterranean and the Levant. Although Italian influence from Pisa and Genoa was strong at times, they could never achieve a final triumph over the cities of Barcelona, Marseille and Montpellier. But the majority of historical writing has looked at what is called the Western Mediterranean mostly in connection with Genoa and Pisa. Perhaps, a reason for this is the relatively early and aggressive move westwards of these two Italian maritime republics. Similarly, Skinner said about the problematic research about Amalfitan presence in the Western Mediterranean basin, that “[Genoa’s and Pisa’s] quarrel over Sardinia, [...] combined with their undoubted

Seerepubliken , in: Peter Feldbauer, Gottfried Liedl, John Morrissey (Ed.), *Mediterraner Kolonialismus. Expansion und Kulturaustausch im Mittelalter*, Wien 2005, 111-130.

⁷ For a similar approach see Abu-Lughod. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony. The world system A.D. 1250-1350*, New York 1991, 13.

⁸ For reasons of limited space it is not possible to write an in-depth description of historiography about Mediterranean trade with a complete bibliography here. Instead I will mention just a few historical works concerning the Provencal cities and discuss them here.

⁹ The appellation *Southern France* or *Le midi (de la France)* is historically incorrect, since it implies an affiliation of the south with the kingdom of France that did not exist until the 13th century.

¹⁰ David Abulafia, *Narbonne, the lands of the crown of Aragon and the Levant 1187-1400*, in: David Abulafia, *Commerce and conquest in the Mediterranean, 1100-1500*, Aldershot 1993, 190.

*later success in establishing beneficial relations not only with the Spanish polities [...] but also with the Kingdom of Sicily, may have obscured – even obliterated - evidence of any other city’s activities in the same region a century beforehand”.*¹¹

It has been said that Montpellier acted as the “tutor” of Barcelona but besides that little tribute has been paid to the Provençal Cities.¹² Historiographical tradition is also to blame for this rather biased view. Studies dealing with the local economies of the smaller Provençal (port-) cities are yet to be written.¹³ Although the archival documentation in Southern France is surpassed only by the archives of Northern Italy and Catalonia, little has been done about it.¹⁴ When I started my research, my goal was to cover these “white spots” on the map, connecting the Mediterranean trade with the smaller cities of Southern France. It turned out during the research about Marseille, that the academic community never entirely lost its interest in this region. There are several town histories dating back to the twentieth and nineteenth century, which are based on a wide range of archival material. Cities like Arles¹⁵, Digne¹⁶, Avignon¹⁷, Grasse¹⁸, Nice¹⁹, Tarascon²⁰, Montpellier²¹ and of course Marseille²² were always of interest for local historians. Sadly the tendency to look at these cities in isolation has prevailed up to the present day. These contributions remain loosely linked and were rarely integrated in the bigger picture of Mediterranean trade. In works about maritime commerce cities like Arles, Nîmes or Nice, to name but three, were only relegated as a footnote at best.

Hence, many historians have a gloomy view of the role of Provençal cities in the maritime trade in the Western Mediterranean, which is surprising when we look at the sources. The prevailing opinion is still that the traders from Provence, Languedoc and Catalonia went through a process of development similar to that of the Italian cities. This is, partly true, but the question is why in the first place they decided to invest in long-distance trade at all. Therefore it is necessary to study the commercial development of the Western Mediterranean in the long run. I believe that the key to understanding maritime trade is to

¹¹ Patricia Skinner, Amalfitans in the Caliphate of Cordoba – Or Not?, in: *Al-Masaq* 24/2 (2012), 128.

¹² J. L. Shneidman, *The rise of the Aragonese-Catalan empire, 1200-1350*, vol. 2, New York 1970, 381.

¹³ A rare exception is the volume published by Kathryn Reyerson (Ed.), *Urban and rural communities in medieval France: Provence and Languedoc; 1000 – 1500*, Leiden/ Boston/ Köln 1995. The genesis of these papers was the 30th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo in 1995.

¹⁴ For an overview about archives and primary sources see Robert-Henri Bautier, Janine Sornay (Ed.), *Les Sources de l’histoire économique et sociale du Moyen Âge. Provence, Comtat Venaissin, Dauphiné, États de la maison de Savoie*. Vol. 1-3, Paris 1968-1974.

¹⁵ Erika Engelmann, *Zur städtischen Volksbewegung in Südfrankreich. Kommunefreiheit und Volksbewegung. Arles 1200 – 1250*, Berlin 1959.

¹⁶ Firmin Guichard, *Essai Historique sur le Cominalat dans la ville de Digne. Institution municipale provençale des XIII^e et XIV^e siècles*, Vol. 1, Digne 1846.

¹⁷ L. H. Labande, *Avignon au XIII^e siècle. (L’ évêque Zoèn Tencarari et les Avignonnais)*, Paris 1908.

¹⁸ G. Gautier, *Histoire de Grasse au Moyen-Age depuis les origines du consulat jusqu’ à la réunion de la Provence à la couronne 1155-1482*, Paris 1935.

¹⁹ Robert Latouche, *Histoire de Nice. Tome I*, Nice 1951.

²⁰ Catherine Delebecque, *Histoire de la ville de Tarascon depuis les origines jusqu’ à avènement de la reine Jeanne 1343*. Thèse ms. des Archives Municipales des Marseille, in: “Mémoires de l’Institut Historique Provence” Vol. 7, Marseille 1930.

²¹ A. Germain, *Histoire de la commune de Montpellier. Depuis ses origines jusqu’ à son incorporation définitive a la monarchie française*. 2 Vol., Montpellier 1851/ 1861. Montpellier is only now receiving adequate attention from Kathryn Reyerson, *Business, Banking and Finance in Medieval Montpellier*, Toronto 1985.

²² Victor Louis Bourilly, *Essai sur l’histoire politique de la commune de Marseille. Des origines à la victoire de Charles d’ Anjou (1264), Aix-en-Provence, 1925* ; Thierry Pécout (Ed.), *Marseille au Moyen Âge, entre Provence et Méditerranée*. Faenza 2009.

shed light on the local economies of these smaller (port-) cities and to explore the short-distance trade that bestrode the Mediterranean coast. The crucial question, how the local economies were related to the emerging long-distance trade, has received little attention so far.

Therefore we can observe the following points: On the one hand there is a disproportionately high focus on long-distance trade, especially in connection with luxury goods. On the other hand, 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.²³ It seems that further studies on this topic are most desirable.

Sources and Methods

As indicated, this study tries to bridge the gap between long-distance trade and the local economies in the Western Mediterranean. It is of particular interest how the primary capital accumulation took place. Investments in long-distance trade required a certain level of wealth, which had to be amassed before.²⁴ The obvious presumption is that merchants started their business right in front of their doorstep by doing commerce with their neighbouring towns and harbours. This means that a poorly documented short-distant trade preceded the better known trade with luxury goods from the Eastern Mediterranean.

The trade with the Levant brought attractive rewards, but was a risky business. It could take several years after investing money in the Levant trade until one could expect rewards returning to his coffers. Therefore, merchants usually invested in several different commercial operations to spread the risk. Mediterranean merchants usually did not stick to one city or one market. Instead they hold shares on various ships, were ship-owners or money lenders at the same time and frequently travelled from one city to another. To question how these local economies worked can not be answered through the study of a single city or a single archive. Thus, it is necessary to select sources and methods that depict the object of investigation – the local economies of the minor trading nations.

Therefore, I suggest a combination of several different source-types: Micro-history based on primary sources (notarial acts, trading contracts, etc.)²⁵ is the key to find historical evidences, but it lacks the deeper information we might need about bulk exchange. Contracts about commercial operations with low value were usually not written down or if they were, not archived. So we have to add other sources and methods for studying the economic history. A newer aspect is that of medieval archaeology.²⁶ Especially the trade in

²³ For a similar methodological approach see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400 – 800*, Oxford 2007 (Repr.), 819.

²⁴ For the case of the merchant family Manduel from Marseille see 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.

²⁵ Particularly noteworthy is the complete cartulary of the Marseille notary Giraud Amalric from 1248. John H. Pryor, *Business contracts of medieval Provence: Selected Notulae from the cartulary of Giraud Amalric of Marseilles, 1248*, Toronto 1984.

²⁶ The most famous use of it is the investigation of the so called Pisan Bacini. David Abulafia, *The Pisan Bacini and the medieval Mediterranean Economy: A Historian's viewpoint*, in: Caroline Malone, Simon Stoddart (Ed.), *Papers in Italian Archaeology 4, 4*, Oxford 1986, 287-302.

ceramics or glazed pottery is something historians have paid little attention to. However, with pottery we have one high-bulk item, which was traded across the Mediterranean and serves as one of the few sources for bulk exchange.²⁷ Other important sources are medieval travelogues, which provide us with crucial information regarding travel and trade routes.²⁸ Besides that historical sources about the economic history are from great importance, like the record of revenues and expenditures in the county of Provence ordered 1252 by Charles Anjou.²⁹ By combining a wide range of sources for trade, we extend the classical image of western commercial towns that relied heavily on long-distance trade. While archaeological finds, contracts and privileges tell us about the economic conditions and the “local” perspective of the region, we miss information about the individuals and their business.

As a result, I chose as second approach an actor-based perspective to avoid flat generalizations about the economic development. As stated above, merchants operated in several cities and can't be uniquely assigned to one place. Like today, tradesmen decided where to invest their money depending on the offered conditions. Therefore, I try to explore the business of individuals that operate in a wide region with help of a network analysis.³⁰ Many merchants traded under the flag of a foreign “trading nation” or under the cover of privileges permitting tax reductions, free travel or legal certainty. It seems strange that scholars were not quicker to realise that this habit was rather the norm than the exception.³¹ With regard to these actors, we should ask ourselves who pulled the strings in the maritime trade? Was it seafaring tradesmen serving as intermediaries between different regions, money lenders or merchants in other ports that invested money across the Mediterranean? This question is closely connected with origin of the invested money. Once again we ask ourselves how the primary capital accumulation took place that preceded the long-distant trade.

Finally, besides the study of primary sources and doing a network analysis of the actors, we have to consider the local level of the port city. Port cities are all over the world widely-studied and a fruitful subject. A study about Provence, Languedoc and Catalonia can not neglect the general historical development of the region. Most studies fail to take the various local influences into account. Although most port cities in Southern France were not as important as Marseille, Pisa or Genoa they played an active role in maritime trade. Since it is difficult to characterize a city either as “*peripheral*” or “*provincial*” the term of “*gateway city*” seems useful.³² Especially when we take the short-distance trade with bulk goods into consideration, that might only extend from one city to the next, it is difficult to speak from center-periphery relationships. Urban geographers as McKenzie, Ulman and Burghardt created the term gateway city for modern America, but it looks like the term is also

²⁷ Claire Déléry, Using Cuerda Seca Ceramics as a Historical Source to Evaluate Trade and Cultural Relations between Christian Ruled Lands and Al-Andalus, from the tenth to the Thirteenth Centuries, in: *Al-Masaq* 21/1 (2009), 46.

²⁸ Yaacov Kahanov, Iskandar Jabour, The Westbound Passage of Ibn Jubayr from Acre to Cartagena in 1184-1185 in: *Al-Masaq* 22/1 (2010), 79-101.

²⁹ Édouard Baratier, *Enquêtes sur les droits et revenus de Charles I^{er} d'Anjou en Provence (1252 et 1278)*, Paris 1969.

³⁰ A useful study on medieval surnames as source of origin is Benjamin Z. Kedar, Toponymic surnames as evidence of origin: Some medieval views, in: *Viator* 4 (1973), 123-130.

³¹ David Abulafia, The Levant trade of the minor cities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: strengths and weaknesses, in: Benjamin Z. Kedar, Abraham Udovitch (Ed.), *The medieval Levant. Studies in memory of Eliahu Ashtor (1914-1984)*, Haifa 1988, 183-202.

³² Miriam Frenkel, Medieval Alexandria - Life in a Port City, in: *Al-Masaq* 26/1 (2013), 34.

applicable for medieval cities. Gateway cities, in contrast to central cities, develop between regions of differing types of production on a favourable transport position, like a good natural harbour or at a river. As the name implies, they connect the tributary area and the outside world. They specialise on transport and (long-distance) trade but have to import most manufactured items from a central city. In other words, they live from transit trade or as Burghardt put it: *“Gateway cities become famous as boom towns [...] they become the gathering place for pushers, boosters, those who wish to become rich quickly”*.³³ This is exactly the dynamic picture we find in the 12th and 13th century in the Provence and Languedoc, where cities ascend and fall within several years. What keeps stable are the investments from merchants that always opt for the best found conditions in maritime trade.

By combining the classical approach of economic history, based on primary sources, with the history of personal networks and relationships and the concept of gateway cities, I hope to describe the trade system in the Western Mediterranean. Catalonia, Languedoc and Provence serve as micro-model for the analysis of the complex entanglements and forms of trade, interaction and competition *between* and *in* those gateway cities, between the local and the central.³⁴ By this we avoid over-emphasizing the importance of several cities, just because documentation exists for one city and is missing for another one.

Shifting Dynamics in Medieval Trade

Zooming in: the trade of the “minor trading nations” in the Western Mediterranean

In the Western Mediterranean we find what Braudel following Haëpke named an “archipelago of towns”,³⁵ meaning 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*.³⁶ 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 all of them shared a common multicultural attitude: medieval seagoers needed to maneuver within different cultural settings with different ethnicities and unfamiliar languages.³⁷ Therefore it was necessary to shift identities accordingly to the occasion

³³ A. F. Burghardt, A Hypothesis about Gateway Cities, in: Association of American Geographers 61/2 (1971), 282. (Quoted from Miriam Frenkel, Medieval Alexandria - Life in a Port City, in: Al-Masaq 26/1 (2013), 34.)

³⁴ This methodological approach is explicitly described by Birgit Tremml in her work about Manila. Birgit Tremml, When Political Economies meet: Spain, China and Japan in Manila, 1571-1644, Dissertation University of Vienna 2012, 7.

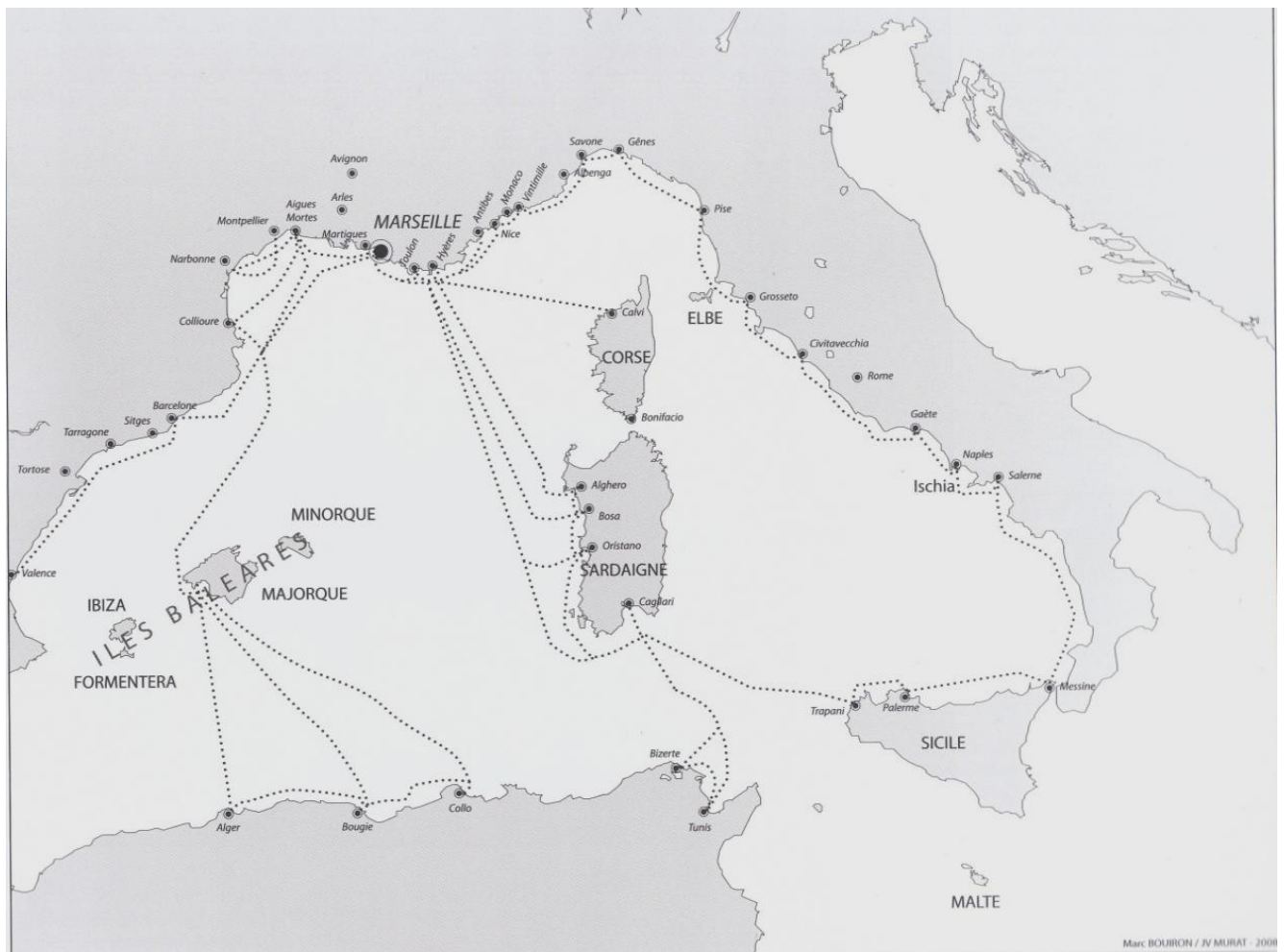
³⁵ Fernand Braudel, Civilization & Capitalism, 15th-18th Century. Vol. III. The Perspective of the World, London/New York 1984, 30.

³⁶ Peregrine Horden, Nichols Purcell, The Mediterranean and „the New Thalassology“, in: The American Historical Review, 111/3 (2006), 732-733.

³⁷ Kathryn Reyerson, Identity in the Medieval Mediterranean World of Merchants and Pirates, in: Mediterranean Studies 20/2 (2012), 129-146

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*³⁸ 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.

In the middle ages, the Western Mediterranean developed into a cross-cultural market of major economic importance for all involved trading nations. Consequently, its economic development became embedded in the complex history of the Italian towns, Northern Africa, Islamic Spain and their connected hinterlands. Although the region was characterized by its religious and political fragmentation, individual scholars have underlined that more work should be done about the issues of communication and entanglement.³⁹ The Mediterranean has acquired a picture of a region, whose population was constantly on the move.⁴⁰



Maritime trading network in the Western Mediterranean⁴¹

³⁸ Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levante Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1983.

³⁹ Horden and Purcell underline rightly the aspect of *connectivity* in the Mediterranean. Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell, *The corrupting Sea. A Study of Mediterranean History*, Oxford 2000.

⁴⁰ David Abulafia, *The Great Sea : A Human History of the Mediterranean*, London 2011.

⁴¹ Picture from Josée-Valérie Murat, *Un voyage vers Majorque: Prêt maritime et routes commerciales*, in: T. Pécout (Ed.), *Marseille au Moyen Âge, entre Provence et Méditerranée. Les horizons d'une ville portuaire*, Faenza 2009, 380.

The Mediterranean is also to be understood as a social space that is labelled by multifaceted ways of migration.⁴² People moving due to political, religious or economic reasons to another country were not unusual but also temporary stays (like in the case of merchants, pilgrims, etc.) were part of everyday life.

Port cities offered additional sources of capital of investment and attracted well-born settlers from neighbouring towns. In the 13th century we can witness Pierre Raymond de Montpellier being five times consul of the city of Narbonne, his brother Guillaume Raymond two times.⁴³ Likewise received 1236 another Montpellier citizen, Raymond de Conques, a privilege from Henry I. of Cyprus on behalf of the people of Marseille, Montpellier and all other Provençal Merchants (*“par la commune de Marseille e de par le people de Monpesler e des autres genz provençales”*).⁴⁴ Raymond himself was citizen of both Marseille and Montpellier and one of the many border crossers that were commercial active in the Provence, Languedoc and Catalonia.

There is a multitude of records about the necessity to cooperate in trade between the so called minor trading nations. These links also reflected a certain degree of economic specialisation, for the inland towns concentrated on the production of goods, while port and gateway cities took care of shipping and transportation. The merchants with their wide spread connections offered banking facilities and an elaborate distribution network. A lack of expertise in a specific branch of business could thus be compensated.⁴⁵ There is good evidence for the cooperation between the Provençal and Catalonian cities. An early example is a privilege from 1187 in Tyre in favour of the people from St. Gilles, Montpellier, Nîmes, Marseille and Barcelona.⁴⁶

Privileges granted „pro omnibus qui Pisano nomine censentur”⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸ 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 borrowing identity seems quite common and we have countless examples for this behaviour. 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?

⁴² Nikolas Jaspert, Austausch-, Transfer- und Abgrenzungsprozesse. Der Mittelmeerraum, in: Thomas Ertl, Michael Limberger (Ed.), *Die Welt 1250-1500*, Wien 2009, 151.

⁴³ Richard Wilder Emery, *Heresy and inquisition in Narbonne*, New York 1941, 28.

⁴⁴ Hans Eberhard Mayer, *Marseilles Levantehandel und ein akkonensisches Fälscheratelier des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1972, 193f.

⁴⁵ David Abulafia, *The Levant trade of the minor cities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: strengths and weaknesses*, in: Benjamin Z. Kedar, Abraham Udovitch (Ed.), *The medieval Levant. Studies in memory of Eliahu Ashtor (1914-1984)*, Haifa 1988, 185.

⁴⁶ Hans Eberhard Mayer, *Marseilles Levantehandel und ein akkonensisches Fälscheratelier des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1972, 181-183.

⁴⁷ Robert Davidsohn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte von Florenz. Zweiter Theil: Aus den Urkunden und Stadtbüchern von San Gimignano (13. und 14. Jahrhundert)*, Berlin 1900, 298.

⁴⁸ Hans Eberhard Mayer, *Marseilles Levantehandel und ein akkonensisches Fälscheratelier des 13. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1972, 65-66.

The answer is as disappointing as simple: we have to stop thinking in categories of “native” 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*.⁴⁹ 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?⁵⁰ The answer can only be given through the careful study of primary sources.

For a better understanding of the economic and social entanglements of these cities, we should not underestimate the dynamic processes of the middle ages. In 1235 the Catalan Dominican Ramon de Penyafort put down in writing the responses of pope Gregory IX. to several questions, which were posed by the monastic community of Tunis.⁵¹ In the foreground the *responsiones* are concerned with apostolic trade embargos against wartime goods and the handling of religious questions. But in the first place, it provides documentation about trade practices. Here we discover that merchants, principally Italians and Catalans, dealt in bulk commodities like goats, sheep, wine, wheat, beans, hazelnuts and chestnuts with the muslims in Tunis. This is one of the few occasions where we have proof that short-distance trade with bulk commodities, in this case foodstuff, took place. This unique glimpse of the working of trade in Western Mediterranean should serve as prove that coasting trade held center stage and influenced developments of the long-distance trade and in turn had an impact on the domestic markets.

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.⁵² Therefore an *actor-based perspective* seems adequate to describe the trade network in the Western Mediterranean.

The emerging long-distance trade between the Provençal coast and Syria in the 12th and 13th 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*.⁵³ 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

⁴⁹ The *pays* was mostly defined by language.

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ The so-called *Responsiones ad dubitabilia circa communicationem christianorum cum sarracenis*. John Tolan, Ramon de Penyafort's Responses to questions concerning relations between Christians and Saracens: critical edition and translation. The publication is part of the RELMIN-project, online at <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/76/12/57/PDF/Penyafort.pdf> (11.08.2014)

⁵² Eric Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity and Co-existence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Baltimore 2006, 20.

⁵³ Peregrine Horden, Nichols Purcell, *The Mediterranean and „the New Thalassology“*, in: *The American Historical Review*, 111/3 (2006), 733.

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 dynamics behind it.