

# LATE-MEDIEVAL MEDITERRANEAN EMPIRES: THE CATALAN EXAMPLE

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'EMPIRE' may be defined as a 'supreme and wide (political) dominion.'<sup>1</sup> During the late middle ages the Kings of Aragon, who came to rule not only in Aragon, Catalunya and Valencia but also in the Balearics, Sardinia, Sicily, Naples and elsewhere, thought of their wide Mediterranean dominion, a dynastic confederation or commonwealth which was also a strategic sphere of influence and an economic community, as being in some sense an empire; and they could address its inhabitants, whatever their language or origins and whether or not they came immediately under the supreme rule of the Aragonese Crown, as their subjects or *naturals* – often using that term in Catalan, the imperial *lingua franca*.<sup>2</sup>

There were, admittedly, oratorical occasions on which it suited the late-medieval Kings of Aragon to emphasize rather more strongly than was justified the effectiveness and cohesion of their own imperial government. The Crown evolved an elaborate administrative apparatus of indirect rule, of *cortes* and parliaments, viceroys and governors-general, but at the same time it was usually sufficiently astute to flatter and respect local and 'national' sensitivities and institutions.<sup>3</sup> Such royal pretensions have led some modern historians astray. In 1970 the American historian J. Lee Schneidman published a book on the 'Aragonese-Catalan Empire'<sup>4</sup> which contained an exaggerated and unreal vision of Catalan power, and which doubtless deserved the savage and telling criticisms it was promptly accorded in a review by J. Hillgarth.<sup>5</sup> Hillgarth subsequently offered his own interpretation of the same theme in an extended critical essay which certainly provides an extremely useful if somewhat debatable survey of a wide range of pertinent and important questions.<sup>6</sup> His work has the cardinal merit of presenting these issues clearly for discussion. The present brief

notes are designed merely to comment on certain controversial aspects of these problems, omitting in particular all discussion of those political, constitutional, legal and cultural institutions which assured varying degrees of autonomy to the component dominions of the Catalan commonwealth, incalculable factors largely ignored by Hillgarth but which had their importance in preserving the unity of the whole empire.

Hillgarth begins, without offering any explicit definition of 'empire', by posing a series of extremely relevant questions; the fifty-page summary of current research which follows will be helpful to the English reader but contains no important major new interpretations; while a concluding section adjudicates, very briefly and not very clearly, on the imperial 'problem'. Hillgarth distinguishes, necessarily, a series of periods in Catalan expansion, but he covers only the first stage down to the death of Jaume II in 1327; this periodization is confusing since he also emphasizes a major change of policy in 1295<sup>7</sup> while he frequently adduces evidence from well after 1327. It is true, as Hillgarth states, that after 1296 the Aragonese king lost direct political control in Sicily and that his Cypriot wife failed to give him the son through whom he hoped to extend claims to Cyprus, but by 1327 Jaume had conquered Sardinia and had permanently preserved Sicily from the Angevins of Naples, while the Balearics, Sicily itself and, in the fifteenth century, even Naples, all subsequently came under the direct government of the Aragonese Crown which had only lost control of the Western Mediterranean islands for a comparatively brief period.

It is certainly legitimate to discuss how far the Catalan form of empire had developed by 1282, 1296, 1327 or any other date. Situations and policies changed, however. Catalan-Aragonese strength in the Mediterranean was a major consideration for all concerned at the height of a great war with Genoa in 1352, for example, or in the fifteenth century, when Alfonso V conquered Naples; it was relevant to the vexed questions of the Mediterranean policies of Ferdinand and Isabella, of Charles V and of Philip II. Whatever the real limitations and frailties of Catalan power – and Hillgarth does emphasize how much was achieved despite these weaknesses – it does seem somehow unsatisfactory, even arbitrary, to cut off the argument at a particular chronological point. Hillgarth concludes: 'The idea of a Catalan "empire" seems . . . misleading. Such an idea could only have taken real form if the Crown of Aragon had really controlled the kingdoms ruled by junior branches of the House of Barcelona, [that is] Majorca and Sicily', and 'The basis for any

real Catalan "empire" must be considered fragile when no major challenge could be overcome except by luck.<sup>8</sup> Such judgement begs many questions; it applies only to certain moments in time; it neglects the economic issues; it demands clearer definitions. It also requires a much wider context and a great deal more research, a whole team of Braudels examining Spain and the Mediterranean world during a succession of periods for many of which statistical and other evidence is largely lacking.<sup>9</sup>

If Venice, a city-republic which had the most meagre mainland resources and which for long avoided major territorial commitments on *terra firma* either in Italy or the Levant, or Genoa, another city-state with a much looser imperial administrative system than that of Venice, can both be considered to have had empires, then Catalunya surely had one also. Genoa's political instability and the comparative independence of its colonies make its case a debatable one, but Venice had a major fleet, a colonial civil service and a series of strategic bases.<sup>10</sup> Hillgarth complains that the Catalan empire 'is continually referred to as if it possessed the same solidity attained by the Roman or British empires of the past'.<sup>11</sup> Here we face a problem of definition. Venice did not have less of an empire because, even with Catalan help, it did not defeat the Genoese fleet in 1352 or because the Genoese very nearly captured Venice in 1380. Why and when the Catalan empire began to decline and what was the nature of its 'crisis' are other, much-debated questions. Nor is it necessarily relevant to Hillgarth's point whether the Catalans or the Aragonese were the more preponderant at any particular moment, or whether it was the Crown or the Barcelonese patriciate which determined or profited from policy.

Hillgarth's insistence on direct political control in Sicily as a criterion of Catalan empire<sup>12</sup> seems partly misplaced. Jaime II's brother Federico replaced him as King of Sicily in 1296 but what followed, despite the outward and occasionally even bloody appearance of formal warfare, was actually a tacit alliance.<sup>13</sup> Between 1296 and 1409 fundamental economic interests held Catalunya and Sicily remarkably close; even in the case of Genoa, a real enemy, Genoese trade with Sicily and Catalunya continued through long periods of armed conflict.<sup>14</sup> Sicilian ports, the Sicilian grain needed in Catalunya, Genoa and Tunis, and the Sicilian markets for Catalan cloth and other manufactures formed essential elements in a series of triangular or polygonal trading relationships which did not collapse merely because the King of Aragon's brother became king in Sicily. Whether or not the Aragonese king benefitted per-

sonally, it was these mutual commercial interdependencies which formed the foundations of the Catalan common market, of what Mario del Treppo calls the *Impero dei mercanti catalani*.<sup>15</sup> It was economic rather than military realities which were decisive. Admittedly, Catalan naval power was always strictly limited,<sup>16</sup> but even if that had not been the case the Mediterranean could still not have become a 'Catalan lake', for the technical limitations of galley warfare prevented any power from keeping its fleet permanently at sea in distant parts in such a way as to control the whole or even a major part of the Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup>

The modern discussion of Catalan policy in the Eastern Mediterranean was initiated at a congress in 1957. Using in particular a document of 1311 in which Jaume II spoke of the Mediterranean islands as stepping stones to the Levant together with a series of fifteenth-century shipping statistics, the outstanding Catalan historian Jaime Vicens Vives launched his theory of a *ruta de las especias* across the islands of the Mediterranean to Egypt. This thesis saw the spice trade as providing 'the fundamental structure of the great commerce of Barcelona and the basis of the Mediterranean imperialism of its kings.'<sup>18</sup> It was almost immediately rejected by the Sicilian medievalist Francesco Giunta<sup>19</sup> and in numerous subsequent publications including, most recently, that of Hillgarth. It is now generally agreed that Catalan interests lay predominantly in the Western Mediterranean, that the Maghreb was more important than Egypt, and that the Crown consistently avoided the implication of its limited armed strength in the East.

It does not, however, follow that there was no such thing as a Catalan empire. If the Kings of Aragon avoided entanglements with the crusade and with the exploits of the Catalan Companies which conquered Thebes and Athens in 1311, that was for lack of resources rather than for lack of interest. In the Northern Levant, Catalan commerce and royal involvement in *Romania* were slight.<sup>20</sup> In 1352 the combined Catalan and Venetian navies fought an inconclusive battle against the Genoese in the Bosphorus. Losses were heavy on both sides and the results were ultimately disappointing to the Catalans who never again sent a major force into the Eastern Mediterranean, but it is hard to understand why Hillgarth should call this naval intervention 'disastrous', especially as the Catalan-Venetian fleet did roundly defeat the Genoese off Alghero in the following year.<sup>21</sup> To the south, Jaume II concluded treaties with the Mamluk sultans; he made the ambitious if ultimately fruitless Cypriot marriage of 1315; Catalan pirates operated between Fama-

gusta and Alexandria; and trade with Egypt brought in 'perhaps as much as 300,000 *sueldos* in a good year', some ten percent of which went to the Crown in licences or fines so that, as Hillgarth himself points out, 'In the treasury accounts for 1302 fines for trading with Alexandria constituted almost half the revenues the Crown received from Catalonia.'<sup>22</sup>

Levantine affairs may have been marginal but evidently they were far from negligible. It may yet transpire that the luxury trade from Egypt, Syria and Cyprus provided the capital for a group of Catalan patricians who possibly played a key role both in the formation of royal policy and in the industrial development of Barcelona.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, such considerations are marginal to the main issue of empire. Whatever its precise nature, however it changed from one period to another, whoever benefitted from it most, wherever its real centre lay at any particular moment, the Aragonese Crown, or *los païses de la Corona de Aragón*, constituted an entity which was something more than a mere *regnum* and which may, with suitable qualifications, be termed an 'empire', a 'supreme and wide (political) dominion'.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, ed. H. & F. Fowler (5th ed: Oxford, 1964), 397.

<sup>2</sup> The bibliography is voluminous; see especially *Indice Histórico Español*, I - (1953- ).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Ryder, 'The Evolution of Imperial Government in Naples under Alfonso V of Aragon', in *Europe in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. J. Hale *et al* (London, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> J. Lee Schneidman, *The Rise of the Aragonese-Catalan Empire: 1200-1350*, 2 vols. (New York, 1970). Schneidman was, of course, following many modern Catalan writers who had political and other motives for advancing exaggerated views concerning Catalunya's past strength and glory.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hillgarth, in *Speculum*, XLVII (1972), 345-353.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hillgarth, *The Problem of a Catalan Mediterranean Empire: 1229-1327* = *English Historical Review*, Supplement 8 (London, 1975). A Spanish version of this work, cyclostyled and without notes, was circulated among the acts of *I Congreso Internacional de Historia Mediterránea: Palma, 1973* (forthcoming). Hillgarth's *The Spanish Kingdoms, 1250-1516*, I:

1250-1412: *Precarious Balance* (Oxford, 1976), which was not available at the time of writing, repeats much of *Problems* more briefly but within a wider, more original context and in a more balanced way; Hillgarth repeatedly emphasizes the inconsistency, as well as the limitations, of Catalan policy.

<sup>7</sup> *Problem*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Problem*, 52, 53.

<sup>9</sup> However, M. del Treppo, *I Mercanti catalani e l'espansione della Corona d'Aragona nel secolo XV* (2nd ed: Naples, 1972), is fundamental; the reign of Pere III (Pedro IV) constitutes the most serious lacuna.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. F. Thiriet, *La Romanie vénitienne au Moyen Âge: Le développement et l'exploitation du domaine coloniale vénitien (XIIIe – XVe siècles)* (Paris, 1959). There is no space here for an extended comparison of the Venetian, Genoese and Catalan empires.

<sup>11</sup> *Speculum*, XLVII, 351.

<sup>12</sup> Eg. in *Speculum*, XLVII, 352, and *Problem*, 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Hillgarth himself (*Problem*, 34-38) partly accepts this. See A. Giuffrida's introduction to *Acta Siculo-Aragonensia, II: Corrispondenza tra Federico III di Sicilia e Giacomo II d'Aragona*, ed. F. Giunta – A. Giuffrida (Palermo, 1972), which Hillgarth ignores.

<sup>14</sup> M. del Treppo, 'Tra Genova e Catalogna...', *Atti del I Congresso Storico Liguria-Catalogna* (Bordighera, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Del Treppo, *Mercanti*, p. xiv.

<sup>16</sup> Hillgarth does not cite perhaps the most important study: J. Robson, 'The Catalan Fleet and Moorish Sea-Power: 1337-1344', *English Historical Review*, LXXIV (1959), though he does mention it in his *Spanish Kingdoms*, I, 431.

<sup>17</sup> J. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1974), is especially relevant. Hillgarth, *Problem*, 12-13, does discuss naval power very briefly, but more information and further analysis of the type provided by Robson and Guilmartin would probably lead to the rejection of his insistent views (*Problem*, 53 *et passim*) concerning the fragility of Catalan 'empire' and the 'luck' which alone, he considers, permitted its survival.

<sup>18</sup> J. Vicens Vives *et al.*, 'La economía de los países de la Corona de Aragón en la baja edad media', *VI Congreso de Historia de la Corona de Aragón* (Madrid, 1959), 106-107. Vicens, 104, also wrote of 'el proceso de formación de la Confederación catalanoaragonesa y de su complejo imperial en el Mediterraneo occidental'.

<sup>19</sup> F. Giunta, *Aragonesi e catalani nel Mediterraneo*, II (Palermo, 1959), 7-18.

<sup>20</sup> A. Luttrell, 'La Corona de Aragón y la Grecia catalana: 1379-1394', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, VI (1969), surveys the whole topic.

<sup>21</sup> *Problem*, 48; for the Catalan viewpoint of this major battle, see A. Luttrell, 'John Cantacuzenus and the Catalans at Constantinople: 1352-1354', *Martínez Ferrando, Archivero: Miscelánea de estudios dedicados a*

*su memoria* (Barcelona, 1968); G. Meloni, *Genova e Aragona all'epoca di Pietro il Cerimonioso, I: 1336-1354* (Padua, 1971); and M. Costa, 'Sulla Battaglia del Bosforo: 1352', *Studi Veneziani*, XIV (1972). Alfonso V subsequently revived an Aragonese interest in *Romania: Del Treppo, Mercanti*, 597-600 *et passim*, and *idem*, 'Tra Genova e Caralogna', 661-663.

<sup>22</sup>Hillgarth, *Problem*, 40-43, 47-48. J. Trenchs Odena, 'De Alexandrinis: El comercio prohibido y el papado avinoñés en la primera mitad del siglo XIV', *I Congreso Internacional de Historia Mediterránea: Palma, 1973* (forthcoming: circulated in cyclostyle), is a most important contribution.

<sup>23</sup>In addition to the work of Del Treppo, the whole question of the formation of Catalan capitalism, of the distant origins of Barcelonese industrialization, and of the connections with the Levant trade, have been the object of recent studies, published and unpublished, by J. Ruiz Doménech; these are cited and summarized in F. Udina Martorell, 'La expansión mediterránea catalano-aragonesa', *II Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre Culturas del Mediterráneo Occidental* (forthcoming: circulated in cyclostyle).

