A LAND OF MIGRANTS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.  
IBERIAN MIGRATORY FLOWS IN SARDINIA  
BETWEEN THE 12TH AND 15TH CENTURIES

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ABSTRACT

The island of Sardinia is a meeting point for three continents, receiving a constant migration since prehistoric times. The migration from the Iberian Peninsula was permanent and consistent between the 12th and 15th, as stated in Italian and Spanish sources. In this framework, our approach analyse the internal and external mobility of the population and the intense movement of people, ideas and goods that have profoundly marked the different territorial and urban features of the island. The paper shows the different sizes and types of Iberian migrations in Sardinia and emphasizes the distinction between the first migration (those who migrated to Sardinia taking part in the military conquest of the island by the Infante Alfonso) and the second one (those who participated in the subsequent occupation and domination of the island).1

KEYWORDS

Sardinia, Mediterranean, Iberian Peninsula, Crown of Aragon, Migration, Trade, Cultural Exchange, 12th-15th Centuries.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Sardinia, Mediterraneum, Peninsula Iberica, Corona Aragonum, Migratio, Commercium, Culturae Mutatio, Saecula XII-XV.


1. Images and clichés

When speaking of Sardinia one often refers to a poor, isolated region that has been repeatedly conquered and colonized by invading forces—a land from which people have emigrated rather than to which they have migrated. However, this depiction of the island stems mostly from 19th to early 20th century literature and historiography. The numerous travellers who visited the island and reported their opinions and impressions in travel logs played a significant role in creating this vision of Sardinia.

It is rather disconcerting to find that many selected the island just because it was famed to be a primitive region, rugged and wild, inhabited by singular, bizarre peoples with arcane customs; it thus offered something different from the canons of the European Grand Tour, the educational travels typically undertaken by the rich, young noblemen and women of 18th century England.²

The most striking case is that of the English novelist David Herbert Lawrence, whose famous book *Sea and Sardinia* is based on his visit to Sardinia in 1921. Although he sings high praises of the island, in explaining why he undertook the trip he writes:

Sardinia, which is like nowhere. Sardinia, which has no history, no date, no race, no offering. Let it be Sardinia. They say neither Romans nor Phoenicians, Greeks nor Arabs ever subdued Sardinia. It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilisation (...).³

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1. Report presented at the European Migration Network Seminar held in Cagliari on 10 April 2015 and organized by the National Research Council's Institute for the History of Mediterranean Europe (Cagliari), by the Ministry of the Interior (Rome), by the European Migration Network (EMN) and by the National Research Council's Department of Human and Social Sciences (Rome).


One could continue with many other similar examples, all of which have a common denominator: they do not explore the island’s multiform and stratified history but paradoxically and inexplicably fail to acknowledge its complexity.\(^4\)

Without adding to or detracting from the value of these testimonies—which were in any case in accord with the opinions of historians of the period—,\(^5\) one must consider that they mainly reflected the situation on the island at the time: its difficulties and poverty, its actual economic and social backwardness, its isolation from communication networks. Nevertheless, these judgements cannot be extended to the whole of Sardinian history or be transferred from the 19th century to other periods in time, nor can they be considered the only possible historiographical interpretation.

### 2. History of conflicts and integration

The testimony of 19th and 20th century travellers and interpretations of the historiography of the period reveals two main aspects: firstly, the certainty that is image of Sardinia is a cliché repeated slavishly throughout its history and, secondly, the impression that the history of Sardinians differs and is distinct from that of the numerous invaders.

A history—that of Sardinians—which differs from the official one depicting submission and lack of expectation, with no signs of integration or common development. A history of rebellion and constant struggles against foreign powers, of lost battles and magnificent heroism, which encouraged the theorization of a Sardinian identity that was never conquered, never violated by any foreign invasion, unchanged and unchangeable throughout the centuries, especially in the innermost reaches of the island, that is in the inaccessible and rebellious Barbagia. A perspective which, followed by many, saw its maximum expression in the theory of the “the constant of Sardinian resistance”, formulated by the famous Sardinian archaeologist Giovanni Lilliu; in an article addressing this topic he claimed that

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Is this really true? Has the history of Sardinia really always been distinctly separate from that of the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, the Romans, Genoese, Pisans and Catalan-Aragonese? And is it a good thing to base historic interpretation on opposed ethnic groups rather than, for example, on the activities and development of social groups? And was Barbagia really so inaccessible and unspoiled?

Depending on the historical period, there are numerous possible, often contradictory, answers. In this sense the topic of migrations can provide essential elements for clarifying and verifying different theories and situations.

Migratory phenomena can no doubt be considered relatively new phenomena. Although they have served to populate the various continents and represent a significant factor in demographic and economic development, they have and always will create forms of mistrust and conflict. Ever since antiquity, nations and rulers have continuously attempted to channel and control both mass and individual migratory flows.

Lying at the centre of the Mediterranean and at the meeting point of three continents, Sardinia has witnessed continuous migratory flows since prehistoric times. As I do not wish to address the problem of mobility in the long term, I will not discuss the Phoenician, Phoenician-Punic or Roman colonizations. Nor will I touch upon Tuscan or Ligurian colonizations, although these would merit lengthy

6. “Every period of Sardinian history has a peculiar hallmark: that of always being dominated (...), but of always having resisted. An island on which the oppressive hand of colonizers ruled for centuries and against which the resistance fought constantly tooth and nail. Although Sardinians experienced all sorts of forced integrations, they were nevertheless able to maintain their identity. In the ethnic and cultural confusion that inundated the island for millennia, they always re-emerged, faithful to their authentic, pristine origins”. Lilliu, Giovanni. La costante resistenziale sarda, ed. Antonello Mattone. Nuoro: Ilisso, 2002: 225-237, especially 225.

discussion; it should be noted that movement from Pisa and Genoa to the island was not only for economic reasons or conquest and that it had highly significant demographic, social, anthropological, economic and political implications. In Sardinia, Pisans and Genoese built castles, founded villages and, Pisa especially, built cities that would play an important role in the events of the island, for example Villa di Chiesa (present-day Iglesias) and Castel di Castro (present-day Cagliari).

Not only. Many members of the nobility, thanks to diplomatic agreements and matrimonial ties, became a part of the reigning dynasties in the four states, better known as the giudicati, into which Sardinia was divided at the time. Such complete integration allowed these outsiders not only to acquire power but to also form new families of second-generation Pisans in Sardinia; their acquired sovereignty and new prerogatives sometimes brought them into conflict with their places of origin and affiliation. This occurred, for example, between certain Pisan houses (e.g. the Visconti family and the marquises of Massa) and the Commune of Pisa, and between the Doria and the Commune of Genoa.


3. The Iberian migratory phenomenon in the 12th and 13th centuries

I feel it is important, instead, to stop and consider Iberian mobility and migratory flows affecting Sardinia in a constant and substantial way starting from the 12th-13th century. This does not mean that we must senselessly and tiringly go back to the medieval period; we should instead attempt to reconstruct the internal and external mobility of populations that have profoundly characterized the island’s varied local and urban contexts. Thanks to these phenomena we can break from the traditional division of the medieval, modern and contemporary periods, which are instead linked seamlessly in a broad period extending from the 13th-14th century to the 15th-17th century.11

Note that the Catalan-Aragonese had already reached Sardinia in the 12th century and not for the first time in the 14th century, when through armed conquest, in 1323 the Crown of Aragon legitimized the proclaimed Kingdom of Sardinia and Corsica that Pope Bonifacio VIII had offered as a fief to James II of Aragon.12

In actual fact, the marriage of Barisone I, giudice of Arborea, to Agalbursa de Bas-Cervera was celebrated in 1157; the latter was the niece of Ramon Berenguer IV, Count-prince of Barcelona, and daughter of his sister Almodis.13 The reasons for this marriage can be traced to relationships at the time among Catalonia, Sardinia and Genoa, to the importance of the Mediterranean area to the Catalanians and Genoese, and to the interests of Barisone I of Arborea in extending his dominion over the entire island and to, this end, in creating allies.

In this context, it is worth noting that many of Agalbursa’s Catalan relations also established themselves in Arborea (as reported in historical records) and contracted marriages with local “donnikelle”, thereby acquiring a prominent position in the giudicati hierarchy; they were accompanied by other nobles of varying provenance and by knights faithful to Catalonia. Even the latter settled on the island and were awarded public offices and property, thanks to which they integrated perfectly in the administrative, economic and social structure of the giudicato.

Ties between Sardinia and the Iberian peninsula, or rather between Sardinia and Catalonia, were no doubt strengthened progressively after the 12th century and commercial contacts increased starting in the 13th century, as confirmed by the presence of Barcelonese merchants in Oristano and Castel di Castro prior to 1300.

In Oristano, for example, the commercial centre of a prosperous agricultural hinterland, there is evidence of intense mercantile activity specialized in Mediterranean commerce—as Carmen Batlle noted—and of warehouses that stored items of different type and origin belonging to numerous Catalan operators: from French fabrics to paper, from painted earthenware bowls to jugs of vinegar, from Saracen leather seats to many other varied types of goods. Even the Catalan colony must have been very important and flourishing—given the presence of a Consul already in 1301—, frequented by the owners and masters of ships used by Pisans to transport goods from Sardinia to the Commune of Pisa. Various historical documents suggest that a large number of merchants were linked to the Cagliari trading centre and that a good number had actually settled there permanently, at least for part of the year. These businessmen, especially those from Barcelona and Majorca, had made local production and trade agreements with Pisa and had

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14. Especially Agalbursa’s brother, Ugo-Poncio de Bas-Cervera, a key player in matrimonial negotiations with Barisone I (having married in 1177 Sinispella, daughter of Barisone’s brother-in-law and his first wife Pellegrina de Lacon), acquired a prominent position within the giudicati dynastic hierarchy. His son Hugh I inherited the Viscount of Bas in Catalonia and became the giudice of Arborea in 1192. He was succeeded by his firstborn, who acceded the throne of Arborea as Peter II; his descendants all retained the title of viscounts of Bas and giudice of Arborea. These are the giudici who in the second half of the 14th century became the main adversaries of the King of Aragon in Sardinia. See Genealogie medioevali…: 378-379 and 381-382.


17. Batlle, Carmen. “Noticia sobre los negocios”…: 278, 286. The consul of the colony of Cagliari, Ramon de Tolosa, was a citizen of Barcelona.
formed companies with the most important Pisan families such as the Alliata, who had immigrated and established themselves permanently in Sardinia.\textsuperscript{18}

In practice, in the 13th century the island became an important stop for Catalan-Aragonese mercantile ships, especially for those heading to Sicily, North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. The Crown of Aragon’s plans to conquer Sardinia was obviously welcomed by Iberian merchants and traders, who saw it as an opportunity to boost their activity and strengthen their presence on the island.\textsuperscript{19}

This does not mean that they promoted the campaign, nor that their expectations were fulfilled by it. After its occupation the island no longer had a single class of merchants. There were enormous differences among them, depending on the period, in terms of origin, interests, type of shops, role and local integration. It is obviously impossible to compare a Catalan merchant residing in Cagliari at the end of the 13th century, who formed companies with Pisans, and one residing in the same city at the end of the 14th century. The latter was involved in the conflict between Catalans and Sardinians, lived in a beleaguered city at war and sometimes carried out a corsair-like commerce. The 15th century merchant instead belonged to a family that had established itself on the island a century earlier, was born in Sardinia, and took part in the integration of the Kingdom of Sardinia in the Crown of Aragon and, at the end of the century, in that of Spain.\textsuperscript{20}

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4. Migratory flows in the 14th century: modes and players

After the armed conquest of the island, and in any case starting in the 14th century, a real, intense migration began from the Iberian Peninsula to Sardinia, and from the latter to the territories under the Crown of Aragon. It is of great historical and anthropological importance to quantify this migratory flow and identify the persons and categories involved; this can help understand the conquest of Sardinia, reconstruct all its phases and, most importantly, assess the contribution of subjects of the Iberian Confederation to the Crown of Aragon’s project of expansion into the Mediterranean, their expectations, and the benefits accorded to each.21

All the same, before discussing 14th century Iberian migration to Sardinia, it is important to make a subtle distinction between the first migratory flow, consisting of those who migrated to Sardinia in the footsteps of the Infant Alfonso and those who settled there later in order to take active part in the occupation and domination of the island.22

As for the former migration, there is obviously no single complete list of the very many who took part in the conquest; however, there are numerous historical documents, some of which are highly significant and exhaustive. For example, the privileges James II granted to those who volunteered to fight in the Sardinian army reveal the characteristics of future migrants, be they knights or soldiers. The


documents contain full details of their identity and social condition, their origin, parentage, profession and the reasons that pushed them to take part in the military undertaking.\(^{23}\)

Nobles, knights and soldiers, however, did not arrive on the island with just the first migratory flow during the conquest. They also represent a large part of the second migration to Sardinia when James II, and Prince Alfonso especially, realized the strategic and military potential of the island’s rapid colonization.

A concrete example of the latter migration is that from Castello di Cagliari and from its conquest. In June 1324, when peace was signed between the Crown of Aragon and Pisa, Castel di Castro, an important centre of trade in the Mediterranean and the capital of Pisan dominions on the island, remained in the hands of the Maritime Republic of Pisa.\(^{24}\) The Prince, understanding full well the difficulties in conquering the Sardinian-Pisan walled city, both for its position and its imposing fortification, believed he could make it surrender without armed intervention by creating such antagonism as would lead the city to exhaustion and capitulation. He therefore set up an encampment before the fortress and set about transforming the provisory installation into a true city inhabited by settlers from the Iberian homeland, and to which he wished to assign a vast hinterland and a port that could compete with that of Castel di Castro. This new city, which he named Bonaria, was assigned the task of competing economically and demographically with the Sardinian-

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Pisan capital in order to determine a crisis and its spontaneous abandonment. Although failing in its intent because the Pisans engaged in a last direct battle with the Catalan-Aragons, the project was nevertheless highly successful in developing and populating Bonaria. The privileges accorded to settlers and economic prospects were so favourable that within a few months a large number of immigrants from every state under the Crown of Aragon reached the island, and the city of Bonaria soon counted more than six thousand inhabitants.

When Castel di Castro opened its gates to Prince Alfonso, not peaceably as Alfonso had predicted but after another fierce battle, the city was immediately repopulated with Catalans and all citizens of Pisa were systematically expelled. In short, whereas the Prince’s plan to conquer Cagliari had been conceived and planned well, his policy for repopulating the castle (a key element of the newly established reign abroad) varied, was difficult to implement and seemed sometimes contradictory. In the end Bonaria was abandoned definitively and Castell de Càller was established with some difficulty; as the capital of the new Catalan-Aragon Regnum Sardiniae et Corsicae, it became a totally Iberian city, maintaining this physiognomy in subsequent decades.

It is here important to note the use of migration as an instrument of conquest and dominion. Throughout its dominion over the island, the Crown of Aragon widely

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adopted the expedient of repopulating key centres of the island through migration flows from Iberia. Other examples are Sassari in 1329 and Alghero in the mid 14th century. The latter especially, after a long siege and its definitive conquest by King Peter IV of Aragon in 1354, was largely repopulated. Catalans from the western coast of Sardinia flowed into the city to guarantee its defence, and therefore control of one of the island's most strategic areas.31

The methods used to promote migratory flows were those used from the start at Castell de Càller: economic and juridical advantages, various exemptions, safe conducts, debt moratoria, food aid, funding of the voyage from the Iberian peninsula to Sardinia and, most important of all, the concession of land, homes and feudal estates.32


32. La Sardegna si integra così nell’ingranaggio del potere catalano e persino del ‘cursus honorum’ degli ufficiali. Molti cavalieri potranno sostenere di aver già compiuto gli obblighi militari dopo aver realizzato i contributi di cavalli armati richiesti per le campagne in Sardegna. La grande maggioranza dei partecipanti alle imprese militari sarde, infatti, invocheranno, al loro ritorno, questi servizi d’armi per essere debitamente ricompensati attraverso l’ottenimento di terre, benefici e incarichi pubblici. In alcuni casi, la compensazione arriva per la scomparsa di familiari che perdono la vita sull’isola per vari motivi (…). In realtà, la Sardegna non godeva di un fascino tale da far abbandonare gli affari e andarvi a combattere come chiedeva il re (…). La guerra e la malattia facevano sì che dalla Catalogna l’isola potesse essere vista come una tenebrosa isola di pena e castigo (“Sardinia is thus part of the mechanism of Catalan power and even of the ‘cursus honorum’, the sequential order of public offices. Most knights could consider their military obligations fulfilled after having provided the requested number of armed horses for campaigns in Sardinia. On their return from Sardinia, most of those who took part in these military campaigns expected their services to be duly rewarded through concessions of land, benefits and appointments to public offices. In certain cases, compensation arrived through the disappearance of family members who die on the island for various reasons (…). In actual fact, Sardinia was not such an attraction as to abandon businesses in order to take part in the campaigns, as the king requested (...). War and illness were such that the Catalanians saw [Sardinia] as a bleak island of pain...
Subsequently, and especially after the war, the presence of these centres of Iberian origin in the island’s most important cities was a key factor in maintaining and consolidating the Catalan occupation of Sardinia, as well as in integrating the Kingdom of Sardinia and Sardinians in the territory of the Crown of Aragon.

It is more difficult to quantify and define Catalan-Aragonese migration within the island; however, the fact that some royal functionaries and feudal administrators in branches of the Sardinian Parliaments came from Barbagia, the most impervious and remote area of the island said to have a strong spirit of resistance, testify to its having taken place.33

5. The diffusion of migrations from the 15th century onward

Starting in the 15th century, migratory movements between the Iberian peninsula and Sardinia aimed to solve the centuries-old Sardinian-Catalan conflict. This gradually led to the integration of the island in the Hispanic world, despite the Kingdom of Sardinia’s obvious position of disadvantage with respect to other kingdoms under the Crown of Aragon.34

As a result, even Sardinian society began, or continued with renewed vigour, the process of creating a local Iberian culture; political-economic links, as well as social

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and cultural relations, between the states of the Iberian Confederation increased in
frequency and importance.35

Staring in the 1990’s many studies were undertaken on aspects of 14th to 17th
century Sardinian-Iberian social history. These studies shed light on this great
demographic movement: the origin of families and their family ties; their relationship
with the Iberian regions not only from an administrative and institutional standpoint
but also from a cultural and personal one;36 the mechanisms regulating the transfer
of power and the role of certain clans, representing the situation at the time in its
complexity and different forms, as well as the framework of productive systems and
of social organization.37

35. Manconi, Francesco. “L’eredità culturale”, I Catalani in Sardegna, Jordi Carbonell, Francesco Manconi,
e integrazione culturale nel Mediterraneo occidentale fra Quattrocento e Cinquecento”. Studi Storici,
culturali fra Quattro e Cinquecento”, La Sardegna e la presenza catalana nel Mediterraneo. VI Congresso (III
Internazionale) dell’Associazione Italiana di Studi Catalani (Cagliari, 1995). Paolo Manincchedda, ed. Cagliari:
sarda e commercio mediterraneo nel basso medio e nell’età moderna”, Dagli Aragonesi alla fine del
216; Salvador Esteban, Emilia. La economía valenciana en el siglo XVI (comercio de importación). Valencia:
Universidad de Valencia, 1972 and Esteban, Emilia. “Aproximación al tráfico marítimo entre la isla de
Cerdeña y la ciudad de Valencia en el siglo XVI”. XIV Congresso di Storia della Corona d’Aragona (Sassari-
siglo XV: rutas, mercado y ombres de negocios en el espacio economico del Mediterraneo occidental. Valencia:

36. Some noble families of Catalan and Valencian origin were viceroy or royal functionaries. This is
the case of the Centelles, Cardona, Erill and Crespi di Valldaura families. See Mateu Ibars, Josefineta.
Los virreys de Cerdeña. Fuentes para su estudio. I (1410-1623), II (1624-1720). Padua: Cedam, 1964; Floris,
Francesco. Feudi e Feudatari in Sardegna. Cagliari: Edizioni della Torre, 1996; Pons Alós, Vicente. “La
documentación real del fondo Cerdeña en el Archivo Condal de Orgaz. La formación de un patrimonio:
de los Aragall y Bellit a los Gualbes y Brondo”. XIV Congresso di Storia della Corona d’Aragona (Sassari-
‘estados’ en Cerdeña de la casa de Oliva durante el siglo XVI. Documentos en el Archivio del reino de

Retabli restaurati e documenti. Cagliari: Soprintendenza ai Beni Ambientali Architettonici, Artistici e Storici,
1985: 19-24 and by the same author Olla Repetto, Gabriella. “L’organizzazione del lavoro a Cagliari tra ‘400
449; Tore, Gianfranco. “Ceti sociali, finanze e ‘buon governo’ nella Sardegna spagnola (1620-1642)”. XIV
496; Mattone, Antonello, ed. Corporazioni, gremi e artigianato tra Sardegna, Spagna e Italia nel Medioevo e nell’età moderna (XIV-XIX secolo). Cagliari: AM&D Edizioni, 2000; Oliva Anna Maria; Schena Olivetta. “Il Regno di
Sardegna tra Spagna e Italia nel Quattrocento. Cultura e società: alcune riflessioni”. Descubrir el Levante por el
Poniente. Luciano Gallinari, ed. Cagliari: Istituto sui rapporti italo-iberici-Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche,
per una biografia di Francisco Ángel Vico y Artea”, Sardegna, Spagna, Mediterraneo dai Re Cattolici al Secolo
Although with some difficulty due to the scarcity of notary acts, family records, chronicles and literary works, in recent years the Italian National Research Council’s Institute for the History of Mediterranean Europe has undertaken a series of studies on the city of Cagliari and its late medieval society; these comprise prosopographies and studies on individual families that provide an accurate reconstruction of relationships and dynamics among the different family groups, unveiling the complexity of Cagliari’s social fabric from the 14th to the 16th century.38

6. Conclusions

The situation becomes increasingly complex and interesting, and because there are numerous aspects that would merit further analysis but cannot be correctly addressed herein, it is best to conclude with two considerations, bearing in mind the complexity of migrations in Sardinia.

First, having mentioned prosopography, one must stress how this methodological approach can yield excellent results in reconstructing social ties between Sardinia and the Mediterranean, thereby providing insight into the types and causes of migrations in Sardinia. Second, by constructing prosopographies of individual categories and classes —nobles, feudal lords, officials, merchants— it is possible to analyse the processes of discrimination and consequently of society’s integration and naturalization of immigrants.

In our specific case, therefore, it goes without say that it is possible to assess how Catalans, Aragonese, Valencians and other migrants of varied Iberian provenance became rooted on the island, becoming territorially and politically “Sardinians” and thereby contributing to the transformation of the very concept of “Sardinian” discussed earlier.39 Furthermore, it is possible to assess both the level of integration


of Iberian and second generation Sardinian-Iberian families and, vice versa, the level of integration of those who left the island to settle in the various states under the Crown of Aragon, attempting to trace their history and migrations in a Mediterranean without frontiers.