The Balearic Islands and the Crown of Aragon, 1230–1400

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Topic/event Description:
The Balearic Islands of Mallorca (Majorca), Minorca (Menorca), Formentera, and Eivissa (Ibiza) sit approximately 50 to 190 kilometers off the eastern coast of the Iberian Peninsula. The archipelago’s importance to Aragonese and broader Iberian trade, culture, language, and history makes it important for understanding the Crown’s expansion into the Mediterranean during and after the reign of Jaume I “the Conqueror” (r. 1213–1276). Until the mid-thirteenth century, the Balearic Islands were controlled by the Almohad Caliphate based in northwestern Africa. At its height the Almohad Caliphate controlled territory in North Africa, the Balearic Islands, and the Southern Iberian Peninsula on the borders of Castile-Leon and Aragon. Prior to Almohad rule, the island was controlled by the Umayyad Caliphate in the early eighth century before it later joined the Emirate of Cordoba in the latter half of the eighth century.

From the thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries, the Kingdom of Mallorca (Regnum Mallorcae) was established as a cadet dynasty of the House of Barcelona in the Crown of Aragon. The Mallorcan kingdom was initially controlled by the king of Aragon until Jaume I of Aragon’s son, Jaume II (r. 1276–1286, 1295–1311), became the island kingdom’s first ruler that was not also simultaneously the king of Aragon. Between Jaume II’s reign and the end of the Kingdom’s independence in 1349, Mallorca functioned as an important trading post and political ally of the Crown of Aragon. Its role in broader Mediterranean politics, the history of slavery, and the conflicts between Aragon and Genoa made the island chain important for the power dynamic between the Iberian Peninsula and the broader Mediterranean region.

Perspectives:
The history of the Kingdom of Mallorca goes beyond just the islands of Mallorca, Menora, Ibiza, and Formentera. During its full century long history, the Kingdom also included the territories of Roussillon and Cerdanya along the Pyrenean border between Aragon and the Occitan lands of modern France. Due to its large geographic scope, the Kingdom was headed by two capitals: Ciutat de Mallorca (modern Palma) and Perpignan. Each city had its own royal palace and was frequented by all members of the royal family until the destruction of the monarchy. For this reason, the history of the Kingdom of Mallorca must include Iberian and French perspectives due to the geographic layout of the kingdom and its position between the monarchies of Aragon and France until 1349. Until the Crown of Aragon annexed the kingdom, the Crown of France also laid claim to Roussillon and Cerdanya.
Therefore, the history of the Kingdom of Mallorca in the Middle Ages goes beyond just the Balearic Islands and the island of Mallorca itself, as contemporaries in the thirteenth and fourteenth century knew it as a large region that spanned from the Pyrenees to the Mediterranean and included speakers of Aragonese, Catalan, Occitan, Latin, and French. The history of the Balearic Islands and the modern city of Palma de Mallorca are one piece of a larger history of exchange, culture, and politics that transcends the Balearic Sea and includes spaces of modern Spain and France. Mallorca’s history, then, is as much “French” as it is “Spanish.”

Scope

Between the eighth and twelfth centuries, particularly after the call for the First Crusade in 1095, control of the Balearic Islands was a point of contention between the Christian Iberian kingdoms, the Republic of Pisa, the Republic of Genoa, and the Almohad Caliphate. For each polity, controlling the Balearic Islands was significant for trade between the Iberian Peninsula and the broader Mediterranean world and the matter of crusade. By 1113, the Aragonese and Pisans—along with the nobility of the Occitan region of Southern France—embarked on a crusade to control and Christianize the archipelago. The treaty between Aragon and Pisa granted the Christian powers suzerainty over the islands and the permission of Pope Paschal II (r. 1099–1118) to invade. This invasion, however, was short lived as Pisan and Aragonese flotillas entered the Balearic Sea in 1113. While the Christian forces were able to lay siege to parts of Ibiza and Mallorca by 1114, they were unable to hold these lands and were, ultimately, defeated by the Almoravids by 1116.

By 1229, the Crown of Aragon mustered another invasion of the Balearic Islands under the leadership of Jaume I. This invasion—or crusade—led to the establishment of a Christian dynasty ruled over by a cadet branch of the House of Barcelona between two capital cities: Ciutat de Mallorca (the modern Palma) and Perpignan in Roussillon. At the start of the invasion in 1229, Jaume of Aragon’s forces arrived in Madina Mayurqa—the Almohad name for Palma—and quickly sieged the city over the span of several weeks. Over the course of the year, the remains of the Almohad government mounted a resistance movement in the mountains of the island of Majorca until its ultimate defeat in 1231. In the aftermath of the three-year power struggle, the remaining Muslim residents of the island were deported and sold into slavery in markets in the Balearic Islands and the Iberian Peninsula. Following the conquest of the Balearic Islands, the establishment of the Kingdom of Mallorca (Regnum Maioricae) encompassed the islands of Mallorca, Ibiza, Formentera, and the territories of Roussillon and Cerdanya along the Pyrenees Mountains. The island of Menorca remained an independent Islamic kingdom led by Abû ‘Uthmân Sa‘īd ibn Hakam al Qurashi. Until its invasion by Alfonso III of Aragon (r. 1285–1291) in 1287, the independent island of Menorca paid the kings of Aragon tribute (paria) to remain separate from the Kingdom of Mallorca administratively.
In the decades following the initial conquest, the Kingdom of Mallorca and the other Balearic Islands were caught between the influence of the House of Barcelona in Aragon and the House of Capet in France. In part, this political divide was due to the geography of the Kingdom of Mallorca since the official kingdom included Roussillon, Cerdanya, Languedoc, and the Balearic Islands. Due to this geography spread between the southern French coast and the islands, the Kingdom of Mallorca had two capitals: Perpignan and Ciutat de Mallorca. For most of its history, Perpignan served as the primary setting for the business and living of the Mallorcan royal family. Both Perpignan and Ciutat de Mallorca each possessed a royal palace that mirrored the other to serve the interests of the royal family as they traveled between capitals. This arrangement, however, was particularly problematic for the French crown due to Perpignan’s position along with the Mediterranean coast and its place within the Roussillon, a region that the French Crown and the Aragonese Crown both claimed as their own.

This fight between France and Aragon over the Kingdom of Mallorca and the surrounding territory placed its monarchy in a strange position. When Jaume II became the first monarch of Mallorca to rule independently, Jaume faced pushback from his cousin, Peter III (r. 1276–1285), and the king of France, Philip III (r. 1270–1285), over territory in the Western Mediterranean. This conflict stemmed from the broader War of the Sicilian Vespers (1282–1302) which put the House of Barcelona in conflict with the rulers of the Kingdom of Sicily, the House of Anjou. This conflict involved Mallorcan land in Roussillon and the Balearic Islands because of an alliance made between kings Jaume and Philip in the height of the War of the Sicilian Vespers. This alliance ensured that France would not invade Mallorcan territory in retaliation against the Crown of Aragon. This alliance, ultimately, angered Peter III and led to the Aragonese annexation of Perpignan and the imprisonment of Queen Esclaramunda (1250–1315) and the infants of Mallorca. By the late 1280s, James was dethroned and the successor of King Peter, Alfonso III, took control of the Kingdom of Mallorca. During this period of Aragonese control, the Mallorcan royal family took refuge in France until 1295 when the Treaty of Anagni granted authority of the Kingdom of Mallorca to King James and his descendants. This clash between Mallorca, Aragon, and France was one of several disputes between the three kingdoms over territory and control of the island kingdom and its land along the Pyrenees Mountains.

By the 1330s and 1340s, tensions between the Kingdom of Mallorca and the Crown of Aragon had, again, grown sour. King Peter “the Ceremonious” of Aragon wanted to end the semi-autonomy of the Kingdom of Mallorca by absorbing the title of “king of Mallorca” into that of the king of Aragon. To do so, this would mean the dethroning of Jaume III (r. 1285–1295) and the elimination of the Mallorcan monarchy. As a part of the existing agreement between the monarchies of Mallorca and Aragon, the king of Mallorca needed to perform a ceremonial act of homage to Aragon in order to reaffirm the relationship between the two branches of the House of Barcelona. When Jaume of Mallorca finally performed this duty by 1339, Peter IV (r. 1336–1387) was not satisfied. These familial tensions grew worse in the early 1340s when Philip VI of France (r. 1285–1314) threatened to invade Mallorca in order to take over the lordship of Montpellier—a region that the Mallorcan, Aragonese, and French
monarchies all claimed. When King Jaume reached out to Aragon for assistance, Peter used this opportunity to lay claim to Mallorca for himself. For Aragon to assist Mallorca, Peter required Jaume to travel to Barcelona and attend a session of the Catalan Corts (parliament). When Jaume did not appear, Peter opened a legal expedition against him and claimed that Jaume broke the feudal bond between Aragon and Mallorca. Pope Clement VI (r. 1342–1352) arranged for the Aragonese to hold a trial for Jaume where he was officially declared an enemy of the Crown of Aragon and his lands confiscated.

Once the legal process concluded, Peter IV embarked on a campaign to acquire property and ports belonging to Jaume of Mallorca. This led to an invasion of Ciutat de Mallorca and the imprisonment of Jaume’s wife, Constanza of Aragon, and, over time, his children, James IV (ca. 1336–1375) and Isabella, and their stepmother, Violante of Vilaragut (1347–1349). Following Constanza’s 1346 release and death, Jaume remarried Violante and took her as his second queen. Her short-lived reign came to an end when Jaume died in 1349 at the Battle of Lluchamajor in Mallorca. In the decades following Jaume III’s death, Peter IV of Aragon and his descendants remained the kings of Mallorca while Jaume’s children, James IV and Isabella, attempted to unsuccessful take back control of their father’s throne. Until Isabella’s 1406 death, members of the royal family enlisted the help of Louis of Anjou, the Black Prince of England, and others to help them take back their defunct throne to no avail.

From its beginnings as an appendage to the Aragonese monarchy to a flourishing kingdom in Southern Europe, the Kingdom of Mallorca was an important piece of Aragonese history within the Mediterranean and the histories of culture, language, commerce, and religion. From its heights as a centre of mapmaking and Jewish culture to its place in medieval and early modern Iberian history, the islands of the Balearics and their connections in Southern France enriched the fabric of Aragonese and broader Iberian history.

Key Debates

As David Abulafia has suggested in his study of Mallorca and its scholars in his 2002 monograph, *A Mediterranean Emporium*, the Kingdom of Mallorca has not received as much attention by Iberian historians as the Crown of Aragon or the Crown of Castile have. Scholars who do focus on the Kingdom of Mallorca have tended to focus on the end of the Kingdom’s existence during the 1340s. Robert Friedrich’s 2020 article, “From Carcassonne to Argelès: The Agency of the Kingdom of Mallorca during the Wars of the Sicilian Vespers (1282–1298),” has brought new attention to the role of Mallorca in the War of the Sicilian Vespers and how the conflict reshaped the borders of Menorca. Considering Steven Runciman’s landmark study on the Sicilian Vespers from 1958 does not centre Mallorca in its arguments, Friedrich’s investigation of Mallorcan and Menorcan involvement in the conflict prevents a more complete history of the Vespers.

In addition to Friedrich’s work in the field of political history, Kevin Mummey’s 2020 chapter, “Measuring the Margins: Women, Slavery, and Notarial Process in Late Fourteenth Century Mallorca,” centres the role of slavery in the Balearic Islands before and after the Aragonese period. Mummey’s focus on slavery is a piece of a growing field in medieval studies which
focuses on the trafficking of enslaved people in Iberia, the Balearic Islands, Northern Africa, Italy, and elsewhere in premodern Eurasia. For most of its period before and after 1349, the Balearic Islands served as a centre for the trafficking of enslaved people. Ciutat de Mallorca was both a major city in the sale of slaves and a centre for domestic enslavement for both noble and royal families. Mummey’s attention to Mallorca’s history of enslavement in this chapter and his doctoral dissertation emphasize the importance of slavery and enslaved people in medieval Mediterranean culture.

In addition to debates about Mallorcan political history and the history of slavery, scholars of Mallorca such as Katrin Kogman-Appel, have also focused on the interconnected histories of cartography and Judaism on the island of Mallorca. Kogman-Appel’s 2020 monograph, *Catalan Maps and Jewish Books*, follows the career of Elisha Ben Abraham Cresques (1325–1387) during the final decades of the Kingdom of Mallorca. Cresques’s most famous work, *The Catalan Atlas* of 1375, presents a map of Eurasia, Northern Africa, and Southeastern Asia according to information from Catalan traders and sailors in the fourteenth century. Kogman-Appel’s study of the map and Cresques’s career works to centre the Mallorcan mapmaking school in broader histories of cartography and exploration in Iberian historiography, while also emphasizing the importance of Jewish artists, mapmakers, and scholars in Ciutat de Mallorca. As a multicultural city, community, and kingdom, Mallorca’s role in charting the history of the map and its religious groups places it within an already rich scholarship on Iberian intellectual history.

As a whole, the field of Mallorcan history is a field in need of more attention from scholars of Iberia and the Mediterranean in medieval studies. The growing fields and debates regarding political history, enslavement, Jewish history, mapmaking, and culture are working to situate the Kingdom of Mallorca and the Balearic Islands in the broader history of premodern Europe. As one of the shortest-lived kingdoms in premodern Iberia, the impact of Mallorcan, Menorcan, Ibizan, and Southern French cultures, languages, politics, and economic history is one that Iberian scholars have only begun to unravel.

**Further Reading**


Bisson’s study of France and the Pyrenees Mountains highlights the relationship between the Crown of Aragon, Kingdom of Mallorca, and France by surveying the geographical and political tensions present in Mallorcan controlled Roussillon and Cerdanya.

Friechrich’s article centers the conflict over Mallorca and Menorca in the broader history of the War of the Sicilian Vespers. This war pitted the Crown of Aragon against the House of Anjou in Sicily for control of Southern Italy, and, in turn, the Kingdom of Mallorca.


In the later Middle Ages, the modern city of Palma and the island of Mallorca were the center of mapmaking in the Mediterranean. Jewish cartographers, Elisha Ben Abraham Cresques and his sons were responsible for making one of the most famous maps of the fourteenth century, *The Catalan Atlas*.


Kevin Mummey’s study of slavery in the late medieval Mediterranean highlights the role of Mallorca in the slave trade in the medieval world. From the early Middle Ages to early modernity, the Balearic Islands were at the center of slave trading in the Iberian sphere.


Mummey’s PhD dissertation focuses on slavery during a thirty-year period in the fourteenth century following the fall of the Kingdom of Mallorca. Considering much work is still left to be done by scholars on Mallorca and medieval slavery, Mummey’s dissertation and broader work is important for Mallorcan historiography.


The lesser-known Iberian Balearic Crusade of the early twelfth century was a failed attempt by Pisa and the Kingdom of Aragon to invade and conquer the Balearic Islands.

Patton’s new article on race and medieval slavery centers the experience of enslaved people in Mallorca, Aragon, and Castile in later medieval Iberia. Patton argues that thinking about race and skin colour in the Middle Ages is heavily connected to the system of slavery in the Mediterranean.


Phillips’s important study on slavery in premodern Iberia discusses slavery in and beyond Mallorca to provide a holistic picture of slavery in both medieval and Habsburg controlled Spain.