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The Crown of Aragon and the Mediterranean

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Theme Description

In the high and later Middle Ages, the Crown of Aragon was a confederation and composite monarchy of kingdoms and polities stretching from the territories of Catalunya and Aragon in eastern Iberia to the city of Athens at its height. The Crown’s expansion into the Balearic Islands, the Midi, Sardinia and Corsica, Sicily, and Greece during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries shaped the languages, cultures, and politics of the Mediterranean and, by the fifteenth century, the Western Atlantic. As a composite monarchy and an expanding “empire,” the Crown of Aragon was instrumental in shaping the histories of the Iberian Peninsula, the Southern Italian Peninsula, and the Balearic Islands throughout the high and later Middle Ages.

Perspective

In the late twentieth century, scholarship by Thomas Bisson and Joseph F. O’Callaghan focused on the role of the Crown of Aragon in the Iberian Peninsula in an effort to situate Aragon in the broader history of what would become the Kingdom of Spain by the 1460s. Their perspectives on the Crown focused on Valencia, Aragon, and Catalonia as administrative units of the wider federation and how, over time, the merger of these kingdoms led to the rise of the Trastamara in Aragon and Castile-Leon. More recent scholarship since 2010 has worked to broaden studies on the Crown of Aragon to include the Mediterranean, Italy, the Balearic Islands, and Greece in the history of the Crown as a political and cultural entity. To fully appreciate the ways in which the Crown of Aragon made its mark in Italian and Greek histories prior to the fifteenth century, the full history of Aragonese expansion and colonization in the Mediterranean is important for tracing Aragonese history from the early Middle Ages to the fifteenth century.

This article will do so by beginning with the origins of the Crown of Aragon in the Catalan and Aragonese counties in Iberia from the early Islamic period to the creation of the Crown of Aragon in 1137 with the marriage of Petronilla of Aragon to Ramon Berenger IV of Catalonia (r. 1131–1162). In the sections following, the focus will shift away from Iberia to the Mediterranean in order to centre the experiences of the Aragonese in the central and eastern Mediterranean between approximately 1200 and 1450. The focus on the Mediterranean here works to emphasize the degree to which the Crown of Aragon should be understood beyond the borders of Iberia and by scholars of Italy, Greece, and Southern France. Considering the Crown established monarchies and duchies in cities such as Palma de Mallorca, Perpignan,
Athens, Palermo, and Naples, the emphasis on the Mediterranean as the primary landscape for cultural interaction stands at the forefront of this article’s understanding of the Crown of Aragon and high and later medieval history.

Ultimately, taking a more global and Mediterranean approach to the history of Aragon can enable Iberianists to appreciate the ways in which the history of medieval “Spain” can be studied inside and outside of the borders of the Iberian Peninsula due to the movement of Catalans into the Mediterranean and the lands that border it. Iberian, and as a result, Spanish, history, then, must include the role of the Crown of Aragon in Italian, Greek, and Mediterranean histories to see the full view of Catalan culture, linguistics, art, and history before 1500.

Scope

Prior to its role in Mediterranean politics, the lands of the Crown of Aragon in Iberia were ruled by both Christian and Islamic dynasties until the central Middle Ages. In the early eighth century, the Umayyad expansion into the Iberian Peninsula brought the lands of Catalonia and Aragon under the control of the Umayyads and, over time, the Abbasid dynasty. By the late eighth and early ninth centuries, the influence of the Carolingian dynasty of Francia challenged Umayyad control of Catalonia, Aragon, and the Occitan regions of modern France. King Louis the Pious’s (r. 813–840) sacking of Barcelona and Girona in 785 brought the county of Barcelona and pieces of northeastern Iberia under Frankish control. By the end of the ninth century as Carolingian control of Francia and its empire waned, the Catalan counties reunified under the control of a new count of Barcelona, Wilfred “the Harry” (r. 878–897). Wilfred’s rule allowed for the system of primogeniture to control the succession of the House of Barcelona until its dissolution in 1410.

While the Catalan counties quickly gained their independence from both Umayyad and Carolingian control by the millennium, Aragon as a county, and later a kingdom, was not established as an independent region from the Kingdom of Pamplona (Navarre) until the eleventh century. Upon the death of Sancho III of Navarre (r. 1004–1035) in 1035, the Kingdom of Aragon gained its independence from Navarre when Sancho’s son, Ramiro I of Aragon (r. 1035–1063), was successful in defeating his brother, Garcia Sanchez III of Pamplona (r. 1035–1054), in battle. This independence lasted until Ramiro’s own death when his successor and son, Sancho Ramirez, was simultaneously the king of Pamplona and Aragon. This arrangement lasted until 1134 when Garcia Ramirez of Navarre inherited the throne of Navarre separately from Alfonso “the Battler” of Aragon (r. 1104–1134) and ended the period of joint rule between the two kingdoms. The dynasty and political union of both the Catalan counties and the newly independent Kingdom of Aragon occurred only a few short years later upon the marriage of Petronilla, queen of Aragon (r. 1137–1164) and Ramon Berenger IV, count of Barcelona (r. 1131–1162) in 1137. The succession of their son, Alfonso II (r. 1164–1196), in 1164 officially brought the two seats of the counts of Barcelona and the kings of Aragon together under the authority of one “count-king.” Until the merge in the late
fifteenth century with the Crown of Castile and the later Nueva Planta Decrees (1715), the Crown of Aragon remained under the authority of one count-king living and operating in the Catalan capital of Barcelona.

As the Christian kingdoms of the north began to solidify their own political systems, the Caliphate of Cordoba along Aragon's borders began to splinter by the mid-eleventh century. With the fall of the Caliphate of Cordoba in 1031, the remaining Islamic controlled Taifa kingdoms remained independent and separate from the Christian controlled kingdoms in the northern Iberian Peninsula. By the end of the eleventh century, the Taifa kingdoms joined the Almoravid Caliphate of the Maghreb. Therefore, by the 1130s, the Iberian Peninsula was effectively split between the Islamic Taifas and the various Christian kingdoms in the northern and central regions of the Peninsula. This arrangement, however, was threatened over the next several centuries as the growing crusader movement in the eastern Mediterranean made its way into the Iberian Peninsula with the Second Crusade of 1147.

Pope Eugene III (r. 1145–1153) authorized Christian crusaders to enter the Iberian Peninsula in 1147 to aid Christian kings in Aragon-Catalonia, Navarre, Castile-Leon, and Portugal in their ongoing wars against the Taifas. The Second Crusade ended with the siege of Lisbon, Almera, Valencia, Murcia, and Tortosa by armies of English, French, Iberian, and other Christian forces. This mentality of crusading in the Crown of Aragon—often referred to as the Reconquista after the nineteenth century—ushered in a new phase of Aragonese expansion that, in time, brought Aragon's influence and authority into the Balearic Islands, Southern Italy and Sardinia, and the city of Athens. The term “Reconquista” is a modern one created in nineteenth and twentieth century Spanish and English historiography. The term is one that is not accepted by many modern scholars due to its insinuation that Christians and Muslims were at war with one another for the full seven centuries between 711 and 1492. The term also suggests that Iberia was one that needed to be “reclaimed” by Christians of the peninsula from its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. This argument stems from modern thinking about race and religion in Iberia and does not accurately reflect the reality of life in Iberia pre-sixteenth century.

The accession of Jaume I of Aragon (r. 1213–1276) at five years old in 1213 took the crusading movement or Reconquest into the Mediterranean and shaped the position of Aragon in wider European politics for centuries following. In 1229, Jaume I of Aragon took the crusading movement from Iberia to the nearby Balearic Islands off the coast of southeastern Iberia. From the early Middle Ages to 1229, the islands of Mallorca, Ibiza, Menorca, and Formentera were controlled by both the Umayyad Caliphate and the Almohad Caliphate. When Jaume’s forces arrived in Mallorca in 1229, the battle for the island was one of violence and destruction. Over the span of several months, Mallorca’s remaining population was enslaved and sold in slave auctions throughout the Western Mediterranean. The violence of this conquest was similarly felt when Jaume’s forces expanded to Ibiza and Menorca by 1235. As the Balearic Islands were conquered over the span of six years, Jaume I brought his expansionist ambitions and crusading mentality to the close by Taifa of Valencia in southeastern Iberia. Jaume entered Valencia in 1232 with an army of soldiers from Aragon.
and Catalonia. Jaume’s initial attempt at conquest in 1232 was not immediately successful since it took another attempt in 1238 for the Aragonese to capture the city. Once the city was in Aragonese control on October 9, 1238, the Regnum Valentiae (Kingdom of Valencia) was now a smaller kingdom within the larger composite monarchy of the Crown of Aragon.

By the end of the 1230s, Jaume’s armies had annexed the once independent Taifas of Valencia, Mallorca, Murcia, and others. This period in Aragonese and broader Iberian history is a turning point in foreign policy and how the once small kingdom had expanded its own political authority far beyond the city of Barcelona. In the decades following, the Crown of Aragon, once again, found itself in the centre of conflict. This instance, however, brought Aragonese interests outside of Iberia to the Italian Peninsula and the Kingdom of Sicily. In 1282, war broke out between the House of Anjou—the monarchy ruling Sicily—and native Sicilians who wanted to remove Angevin influence from Southern Italy. The Aragonese enter this conflict because of the familial and dynastic ties of Constance of Sicily, queen of Aragon (r. 1276–1285) to the Hohenstaufen rulers of Sicily. Prior to Angevin annexation of Sicily in the 1260s, Constance’s father, Manfred (r. 1258–1266), ruled the island as the successor to his father, Frederick II (r. 1295–1337). When the Angevin dynasty under Charles I (r. 1266–1282) took control of the island, Manfred was executed, and his family was imprisoned in Calabria. For Constance, the revolt against the authority of the Angevins presented an opportunity for her—and Aragon through her—to claim Sicily once more.

Constance’s husband, Peter III (r. 1276–1285), was asked by rebellious Sicilians to enter the conflict and claim the island through right of his wife. Until this war—now known as the War of Sicilian Vespers (1282–1302)—concluded, the Angevin and Aragonese dynasties fought a series of naval and land battles over the span of twenty years. By 1302, the Peace of Caltabellotta ended the war by dividing the Kingdom of Sicily into two parts: the peninsular portion and the island. The peninsula—encompassing territory from Calabria to north of the city of Naples—was known as the Kingdom of Sicily and was controlled by the Angevins, while the island was known as the Kingdom of Trinacria and remained Aragonese. This “peace” kept tensions at bay temporarily since the Angevins and Aragonese would continue to clash over the full Kingdom of Sicily for decades.

In the decades following the War of the Sicilian Vespers, Aragonese control of the Balearic Islands and Sicily shifted as the cadet branches of the House of Barcelona in Mallorca and Palermo faced challenges from the Aragonese kings. For the Kingdom of Mallorca, the ongoing dispute between Peter IV “the Ceremonious” (r. 1336–1387) and Jaime III of Mallorca (r. 1324–1344) ultimately led to the elimination of Mallorcan independence. The conflict between the two kings erupted in the early 1340s when King Peter invaded Ciutat de Mallorca and took the queen of Mallorca, Constance of Aragon (1336–1346), captive. Following Constance’s imprisonment, Jaime engaged Peter IV in a series of battles to prevent the Aragonese from dethroning him and ending Majorca’s semi-autonomy. Ultimately, Jaime’s efforts proved unsuccessful as his 1349 death at the Battle of Llucmajor, ended the conflict and granted Aragon full control over the kingdom. In the aftermath of this battle, James III’s children and second wife—Jaime IV (pretender until 1375) and Isabella and Queen Violante
of Vilaragut (1346–1349)—were taken captive by Aragonese forces and held at the Castle of Bellver. In the decades following, both Jaime IV and Isabella made attempts to restore Mallorcan independence from the Crown of Aragon without success. Upon their deaths in 1375 and 1406 respectively, hope of restoring the Kingdom of Majorca to its pre-1349 independence was extinguished.

In addition to the fall of the Kingdom of Majorca, the Crown of Aragon expanded its reach into the island of Sardinia and the newly established Duchy of Athens in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The 1323–1326 conquest of Sardinia brought most of the guidicati (judeships) of Sardinia into Aragonese control with one—the House of Arborea—remaining independent. The Arborea's independence was not without peace, however, as it remained as a vassal of the Crown of Aragon until its dissolution in the fifteenth century. Between the 1320s and the mid-fifteenth century, the Arborea engaged in a long conflict with monarchs such as Peter IV and Martin I (r. 1396–1410) over territory. This long conflict led to the map of Sardinia to be in constant flux as the boundaries of Aragonese and Sardinian territory shifted constantly. The Aragonese based their authority on the island at the city of Cagliari in the southern half of the island. Cagliari served as an important site of Aragonese control as Aragonese aligned castles, soldiers, regents, and other officers kept the city as a military base for the Crown of Aragon in Sardinia. By the 1380s and 1390s, the House of Arborea attempted to align with the rebellious Chiaramonte family in Sicily to oust the Crown of Aragon from both islands. Ultimately, the imprisonment of Brancaleone Doria (1347–1409)—leader in the rebellion and co-judge with his wife, Eleanor (r. 1347–1403)—led to the beginning of the end of Sardinian independence and the hopes of a joint Italian anti-Aragonese alliance. With Eleanor of Arborea’s death in the early fifteenth century and the deaths of Brancaleone Doria and their son, Frederick, hope of an independent Sardinia was extinguished. By 1420, the full island of Sardinia was now fully under Aragonese control and officially a part of the Crown of Aragon.

In the same moment that the Crown of Aragon was trying to control Sardinia, the Catalan Company led by Roger de Flor established a new Aragonese dominated duchy in the cities of Athens and Neopatria. The creation of the Duchy of Athens and the Duchy of Neopatria began in the early fourteenth century when the Catalan Company traveled to Byzantium to serve the emperor, Andronikos II Palaiologos (r. 1282–1328). The Company was hired in 1303 to aid the Byzantine Empire in their quest to protect their remaining territory in Anatolia and Greece. After a series of battles—most notably 1304’s Battle of Kibistra—the alliance between the Byzantines and the Catalans began to dwindle. Following speculation that the Crown of Aragon wanted to establish its own duchy in Greece and the growing influence of other Westerners such as the Florentines and Genoese in the area, the Byzantines no longer wanted to continue their alliance with the Catalans. This rift, ultimately, led to the murder of Roger de Flor in 1305 at the orders of Andronikos II Palaiologos’s son, Michael IX Palaiologos (r. 1294–1320). Following Roger’s murder, the Catalans fought a series of battles against the Byzantines which led to the establishment of the Aragonese Duchy of Athens in 1311. By the end of the fourteenth century, the Crown of Aragon now controlled polities in Greece, Southern Italy, and the Western Mediterranean from the city of Barcelona to Athens.
growing empire enabled the Aragonese to control large portions of territory in the Mediterranean, which, in turn, allowed Catalan merchants to expand shipping and trade to the Eastern Mediterranean. By the late fifteenth century, the Crown of Aragon’s territory shrunk in size due to the loss of the Duchy of Athens and Neopatria following a series of attacks by the Navarrese Company and the Venetians.

Despite this loss, the Crown of Aragon remained an important force in the Mediterranean into the early modern period. The union with the Crown of Castile in 1469 through the marriage of Ferdinand II of Aragon (r. 1479–1516) and Isabella I of Castile (r. 1474–1504) allowed the Crown of Aragon to function as a piece of the larger Spanish empire. As the Castilian Crown began to colonize the Americas and parts of the Pacific, the Aragonese remained in control of the Balearic Islands, portions of Roussillon, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Following the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714), the Crown of Aragon’s place within the Spanish Empire shifted as the 1715 Nueva Planta Decrees. The Decrees ended the period of Aragon’s semi-independence within the Crown of Spain, meaning that the Crown no longer existed as a political and economic entity within Spain. After 1715, the Spanish Crown was one unified state with one ruler in Madrid. Therefore, from its origins in the twelfth century to its end in the eighteenth century, the Crown of Aragon was a prosperous and critical polity within the Iberian Peninsula and the Mediterranean Sea. Its influence in Iberia, Southern Italy, Southern France, and Greece allowed it to bring Catalan language, culture, and religion to territories beyond Catalonia and Aragon.

Key Debates

In recent historiography on the Crown of Aragon and its Mediterranean “empire” scholars such as Flocel Sabate, Thomas Bisson, and others have debated whether or not the Crown of Aragon can be viewed as a Mediterranean empire or a composite monarchy. Sabate’s 2017 edited volume, *The Crown of Aragon: A Singular Mediterranean Empire*, makes the case that the Crown of Aragon between 1229 and 1492 can be considered as an empire due to its control of regions of the Italian Peninsula, Greece, and the Balearic Islands, as well as the language of *imperium* used in official documentation of the Crown during the reigns of Peter IV and his successors. Alessandra Cioppi and Sebastiana Nocco—two of the contributors to Sabate’s collection—similarly argue that due to the Aragonese presence in the Mediterranean and the global nature of its presence from Iberia to the Levant, that the Crown of Aragon should be understood as more than just a fraction of Iberian history.

In addition to emphasizing the ways in which the Crown of Aragon was a politically cohesive empire, recent scholarship has worked to bring the history of Aragon as an entity beyond the Iberian Peninsula. Recent work by Donald Kagay, Charles D. Stanton, and Robert Friedrich have highlighted the ways in which Italian and Mallorcan peoples and histories have been important for Aragonese history and culture. Kagay’s recent monograph on Elinor of Sicily, for instance, demonstrates the clear dynastic and cultural connections between both branches of the House of Barcelona in Aragon and Palermo. Elinor, like many other Arago-
Sicilian monarchs, had her letters and other royal documents written in Catalo-Sicilian, a hybrid language of Catalan and Sicilian that was adopted by the Sicilian court in the fourteenth century. In emphasizing this bridge between these two regions, Kagay’s monograph is important for understanding how Aragon existed in more ways than just a political federation.

In literary studies, scholars of the Catalan language and culture have made similar arguments about the ways in which Catalan culture and linguistics existed beyond Barcelona and northeastern Iberia. Recent work by Michelle M. Hamilton, Nuria Silleras-Fernandez, and Vicente Lledó-Guillem have explored the role of the Crown of Aragon and Iberia in the Mediterranean by highlighting the ways in which language, culture, and popular religion from Aragon and Catalonia have spread into Sicily, Sardinia, Athens, and elsewhere in the later Middle Ages. As a multicultural and multireligious territory, Catalan movement into trade ports, language regions, and literatures was important for shaping the histories and territories beyond Barcelona itself. Vicente Lledó-Guillem’s 2018 monograph, *The Making of Catalan Linguistic Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Times*, emphasizes the degree to which Mediterranean expansion allowed for Catalan as a language spread beyond Catalonia and mingled with vernacular languages and literatures in Italy and Greece. In addition to Catalan literature, recent work in art history and religious studies have shifted attention to Aragon’s Muslim and Jewish populations and their roles in Aragonese culture, literature, and art history. Katrin Kogman-Appel’s 2020 monograph, *Catalan Maps and Jewish Books: The Intellectual Profile of Elisha Ben Abraham Cresques (1325–1387)*, for instance, has refocused attention to the role of Jewish mapmakers in the Aragonese Kingdom of Mallorca and how the work of Abraham Cresques—most famously, *The Catalan Atlas* (1375)—shaped the field of cartography.

As an empire or a composite monarchy before the sixteenth century, the Crown of Aragon’s role in recent debates about culture, literary history, religious history, and politics has allowed scholars of Iberia to understand the role of the Crown in the Mediterranean world and its place in broader histories of Italy, Southern France, the Balearic Islands, and Greece. Recent debates in these fields will allow future histories of the Crown of Aragon to include the perspectives of all religious groups and regions within the federation until its merge with the Crown of Castile at the end of the fifteenth century.

**Further Reading**


Bisson’s classic study of the Crown of Aragon provides a survey of Aragonese history from the early Middle Ages to the union between Castile and Aragon in the late fifteenth century.

Catlos’s study of early medieval Aragon and Catalonia provides an important look at life for Muslims living in eastern Iberia after the creation of the Taifa kingdoms post-1030. Considering Aragon was a multireligious home of Muslims, Jews, and Christians until the early modern period, this work provides an important overview of that history.


Collins gives readers a look at Iberian history from the decades following the Umayyad expansion into the Iberian Peninsula to the end of the Caliphate of Cordoba. This book provides a survey of political structure and monarchy in both Christian and Muslim controlled regions of the peninsula.


Fernandez-Armesto’s classic work *Before Columbus* argues that the Crown of Aragon, Republic of Genoa, and other Italian Republics were engaging in colonization and exploration in the Mediterranean before 1492 in respect to the Crusades and the Catalan kingdoms of Mallorca, Sicily, and Duchy of Athens. This work considers the Crown of Aragon to be an empire and explores its expansion between the reign of James I “the Conqueror” to the voyages of Christopher Columbus.


This edited volume centers Iberia in the broader field of Mediterranean studies as it considers the role of Iberian kingdoms like Aragon, Granada, and Mallorca in Mediterranean political, social, economic, and religious history.

This collection surveys Sardinian history between the end of the Roman period to the early modern period. Considering Sardinia has been a largely ignored aspect of Aragonese history in English scholarship, this collection makes important arguments about Sardinia and its ties to the broader Mediterranean world.


Kennedy’s short work provides a survey of the history of Al-Andalus in the early and high Middle Ages. It centers Muslim political, social, and economic history in broader histories of Iberia and the Western Mediterranean.


Like the *Companion to Sardinian History*, this edited volume discusses Sardinian historiography and the role of the Crown of Aragon in the island’s history between the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.


This classic work of Italian and Mediterranean history provides an overview of the War of the Sicilian Vespers and the role of the Crown of Aragon in the war and post-1302 Sicilian history.


Sabate’s edited volume argues that the Crown of Aragon comprised of an empire in the medieval Mediterranean due to its colonization of territories in Italy, Greece, and Southern France.