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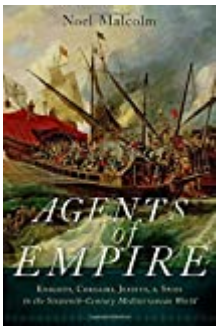

Noel Malcolm. *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 640 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-026278-5.

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In Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcellâs influential 2000 book *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, the authors draw a distinction between two primary strands in Mediterranean studies: histories *of* the Mediterranean, such as Fernand Braudelâs classic and still essential *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2d ed. (1996), and histories *in* the Mediterranean. These latter, much more common monographic works have a narrower focus, treating a specific region, city, or topic without attempting to address broader Mediterranean debates and questions. Noel Malcolmâs *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits and Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World* in many ways straddles these two camps. On the one hand, the author attempts a sort of a microhistorical family history of several Albanian clans situated solidly within their Adriatic context. On the other, because of the widespread movements of the family across the sea, and Malcolmâs richly developed contextual backdrop, the volume becomes, whether intentionally or not, a macrohistorical tale of the Mediterranean itself.

The text is organized in a chronological format, and surveys a broad swath of the sixteenth century. The approach is solidly narrative, and includes a large cast of characters who range widely throughout the region and participate in many of the defining events of the era. The focus is primarily on two Albanian families, the Brutis and the Brunis. They both hailed from the coastal town of Ulcinj (Dulcigno in Italian), in modern-day Montenegro, which was under Venetian rule for more than a century and a half before being conquered by the Ottomans in 1571.

The Brutis and Brunis were âcultural amphibiansâ (p. 34), who pop up all over the Mediterranean and play improbable roles in many of the centuryâs key moments. For instance, Giovanni Bruni was the archbishop of Bar and participated in the Council of Trent; Marcantonio Borisi, son of one of the familiesâ daughters, served as the Grand Dragoman of the Venetian diplomatic mission in Istanbul and played an outsized role in Veneto-Ottoman politics for several decades; Gasparo Bruni was the first Albanian knight of Malta and got caught up in the French wars of religion; Bartolomeo Bruti played a pivotal role in political machinations related to Moldavia. In short, for almost a century whenever and wherever something of significance happened in the Mediterranean, a member of some branch of these two quite remarkable clans was present, and indeed often at the center of events. Malcolm masterfully sketches the rich tapestry of this Mediterranean family history: we get an intimate sense

of the Brutis' and Brunis' individual and collective experiences, but we also get a wonderfully detailed treatment of the broad Mediterranean political backdrop and key events such as the battle of Lepanto and the Habsburg-Ottoman rivalry.

Agents of Empire is also an absolutely terrific example of the historianâs craft, a tour de force of historical research. In his quest to track down the elusive clues left by his Albanian prey, Malcolm has visited seemingly every major archive in the Mediterranean and Europe, and numerous minor ones as well. His mastery of the secondary literature in numerous languages and historiographical traditions is also exemplary. This is particularly noteworthy because so many Mediterranean scholars are limited by their linguistic abilities to treating only a small sliver of the varied source base available in the regionâs rich repositories. Malcolm has quite simply looked under every possible archival rock, and the result is that he is able to recreate an incredibly detailed yet expansive story that is both *in* and *of* the Mediterranean.

My primary quibble with this impressive book is also one of its strengths, namely its voluminous and exhaustive (exhausting?) coverage. The author seems never to have met a tangent he did not like. The central narrative is constantly interrupted by what feels like an unending queue of highly detailed excursuses into seemingly every imaginable aside. Pages are devoted to ancillary matters such as the grain trade, the Council of Trent, slave ransoming, the Jesuits, Moldavian history, dragomans, and many, many other topics. The author seems to feel the need to explain every aspect of his story, no matter how peripheral or insignificant, and then in tremendous detail. This tendency to say everything about everything is also evident in the many highly detailed, narrative descriptions of diplomatic, political, and military maneuverings in which various family members find themselves involved. At times this approach can be effective and engaging; at others the experience can have a very nineteenth-century, Rankean feel. As a specialist I found many of these asides interesting but also distracting, and I fear for nonspecialists wading into this stream of information. The amount of space and depth of detail devoted to minor matters can obscure both the narrative and an understanding of the larger context. In sum, this seems a clear case of occasionally losing the forest for all the interesting trees.

I suspect that in part this was a necessary and intentional strategy, as Malcolm sought to flesh out his characters and their stories when faced with a paucity of sources that directly addressed these figures who often played minor a role, or were simply present, at larger events. The result, however, is that sometimes the main players and events fade into the background, as in chapter 3 where the central figure, Antonio Bruti, occupies significantly less space that a highly detailed, contextual discussion of Veniceâs relationship with Ulcinj and Albania. In the same fashion, Gasparo Bruni disappears for lengthy stretches in the treatment of the knights of Malta in chapter 5.

There is additionally a deeply annoying aspect of the book for which the author cannot be entirely held to account, which is Oxford University Pressâs decision to chain together the more than seventy-five pages of footnotes in one continuous paragraph for each chapter, rather than the usual practice of setting apart each note on its own separate line. While this no doubt saved a few pages and thus cut into the publisherâs bottom line, for a book coming in at over six hundred pages, what difference would a few dozen more have made? This choice makes it a terribly unpleasant task to navigate the notes for those scholars inclined to do so. In the same vein, the decision to stack citations in long notes at the end of each of the often lengthy paragraphs, rather than breaking them apart and linking them more clearly and directly to the relevant passages within the paragraph, compounds the difficulty for interested scholars in making heads or tails out of the rich scholarship at the core of this book, which is one of its major accomplishments and pleasures.

In the final analysis, while a virtuoso work of both research and historical recreation, I found this a difficult book to assess. Part of the challenge, I think, is a certain ambiguity about audience and objective. Malcolm clearly states at the outset that he wrote the book âwith nonspecialist readers primarily in mindâ (p. xx). While such readers may well engage with the text, I think Malcolm sells his book short; there is more to it than he lets on. If it does not necessarily expand our understanding of the early modern Mediterranean, *Agents of Empire* provides a compelling example of the ways in which this world functioned on the ground level, which is something that is often lost in the debates and theoretical formulations to which the sea has often been subjected.

Beyond its admirable recovery of obliterated and overlooked lives, I believe that this book represents a valuable addition to recent Mediterranean historiography. The depth and originality of the archival research and the broad engagement with the most current work in

the field, is a model of historical scholarship. The detailed recreation of an extended familyâs history illustrates in vivid relief the flexibility of identity and political and religious allegiances, the endlessly shifting political loyalties often untethered from religious considerations, the intense mobility and connectedness of the early modern sea. In doing this, the book also gives the lie to the old saw of a Mediterranean characterized by a clash of civilizations. Although Malcolm does not explicitly say it, it strikes me that in some ways his book represents a response to one of the fundamental critiques of Braudelâs great work of structural history, namely the absence of human beings amid all the details on climate, geology, geography, etc. Malcolmâs Mediterranean, in contrast, is inhabited by individuals who are both a product of their setting, but also prove highly capable in navigating and manipulating its multiple boundaries. Another valuable contribution is that, by focusing on the periphery, Malcolm forces the reader to decentralize the state as the dominant entity in the premodern Mediterranean. As he notes, âthe standard model of international history, based on the direct interaction of unit states, which the present naturally projects onto the pastâ (p. 329) obscures our ability to understand the complex and shifting relationships between regions, individuals, and entities in the prenational era, and this book makes clear the different ways in which this world functioned.

In sum, *Agents of Empire* is an important book. I would have liked to see the author engage more directly the scholars with whose work he is so clearly familiar, and I would have liked to see him be more ambitious in contemplating what his work brings to our understanding of the early modern Mediterranean. Notwithstanding these concerns, this is a magnificent piece of historical recreation and a valuable contribution to the field of Mediterranean studies.

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