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David D. Terry
Western Michigan University

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Pirates, Merchants, and a Small Battle on the Island of Kythira in the Later Middle Ages

By David D. Terry

ABSTRACT: Merchants in the later medieval Mediterranean crossed boundaries both geographical and moral. In November 1327 two Mallorcan investors complained to the king's court that their ship, which they had sent to the eastern Mediterranean laden with tradable goods, had been ransacked by the violent natives of Kythera, an Aegean island at that time ruled by Venice. The Venetians, always conscious of maintaining good trade relations, sent representatives to the island and conducted a full investigation. After interviewing the islanders, the duke of the island sent his conclusions back to Venice: the Catalan "merchants" had come ashore on the island and began plundering farm animals and foodstuffs. The islanders took much abuse before finally fighting back, killing several of the pirates and freeing the slaves in their galley. When it came back to the doge of Venice that the Catalans had acted as pirates on Kythera, they offered no compensation to the investors. Using documents from the investigation into this incident, this article examines medieval self-help, the line between merchant and pirate, and the reputation of pirates in a time of violence and economic competition. A complex image emerges in which authorities and everyday people alike struggled to address the problems caused by maritime violence.

On November 25, 1326, bailiff of Mallorca Guillem de Baudela passed a judgment in favor of two plaintiffs, Jaume Cama and Simó Berenguer.¹⁴⁶ The two were merchants from Palma de Mallorca and were seeking monetary compensation for the loss of mercantile goods in the eastern Mediterranean months earlier. The previous year they had entered into an investment contract with Jaume's brother Francesc and a certain Joan Bruni, investing a sum of money in textiles for trade in Greece and Cyprus.¹⁴⁷ Upon their return to Mallorca, a third of the profits would have gone to investors Jaume and Simó, but the voyage had not gone as planned. The ship had apparently made a stop at the island of Kythira, a small island of only about a hundred square miles just south of the Greek Peloponnesus, where local residents invaded the ship, stole all of the cargo, and murdered most of the crew. The court at Mallorca held Venice, who had ruled Kythira since the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, responsible for their merchants' loss and asked for compensation and damages; in the meantime, the investors were authorized to enact reprisal on Venetian merchants trading in Mallorca, confiscating Venetian goods in retaliation.¹⁴⁸

The Venetians, for their part, responded with diplomatic courtesy and dispatched a judge to Kythira to perform a full investigation.¹⁴⁹ After interviewing the islanders involved in the incident, the duke of the island sent his conclusions back to Venice: the Catalan "merchants" had come ashore on the island and began plundering farm animals and foodstuffs. The islanders, who were wary of such piratical raids, took much abuse before finally fighting back. They killed several of the pirates and freed some captured Greek slaves in their ship. When it came back

¹⁴⁶ Antoni Rubió i Lluch, *Diplomatar de L'Orient Català (1301-1409): Col·lecció de Documents per a la Història de l'Expedició Catalana a Orient i dels Ducats d'Atenes i Neopàtria* (Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 1947), no. 143; Riccardo Predelli, *I Libri Commemoriali della Repubblica di Venezia: Regesti*, vol. II (Venice: A Spese della Società, 1878), no. 96. Parts of this paper were presented at the Mid-America Medieval Association Annual Conference, 17 September 2016, Emporia, Kansas.

¹⁴⁷ *Diplomatari*, no. 143.

¹⁴⁸ A substantial bibliography on letters of marque and reprisal can be found in Emily Tai, "Honor Among Thieves: Piracy, Restitution, and Reprisal in Genoa, Venice, and the Crown of Catalonia-Aragon, 1339-1417" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1996), 9 n. 11. See also her "Marking Water: Piracy and Property in the Premodern West," in *Seascapes: Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 205-220; Josefina Mutge i Vives, "La Marca de Bernat Melhac, La Corona Catalano-Aragonesa i El Llenguadoc (1327-1336)," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 16 (1986), 227-238; "Una Marca Francesca Contra els Catalans, Provocada per Francesc Carròs (1323-1335)," in *Homenatge a la Memòria del Professor Dr. Emilio Sáez: Aplec d'Estudis dels seus deixebles i col·laboradors* (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 1989), 127-138; Kathryn L. Reyerson, "Commercial Law and Merchant Disputes: Jacques Coeur and the Law of Marque," *Medieval Encounters* 9 (2003), 244-255.

¹⁴⁹ *Diplomatari* nos. 145 and 147; *Commemoriali* II, nos. 162, 165, 166.

to the doge of Venice that the Catalans had acted as pirates on Kythira, the Maritime Republic offered no compensation to the Mallorcan investors.

Incidents of maritime violence such as this were common in the Mediterranean during the later Middle Ages. During this period, intense migration, warfare, and trade brought Muslims, Jews, and Christians of different confessions into day-to-day contact with each other at sea and in the ports. People from various principalities competed for a share of the valuable trade that brought goods over the Asian landmass or across the Indian Ocean to the ports of the Black Sea, Aegean, the Levant, and Egypt.¹⁵⁰ But there was also money to be made through confiscation, extortion, or robbery as these goods made their way to consumers. Some people took to such maritime violence as a career choice; others were merchants who simply took to piracy when no other more lucrative opportunities arose. Piracy could be used as an instrument of war against subjects of an enemy principality, or it could be random acts of violence such as slave raids on unsuspecting towns or islands. In any case, it regularly gained the attention of officials and left the resultant document trail in the archives.¹⁵¹

Although the Kythira incident is only one such instance of piracy, it is useful not only for the amount of information it presents on a single event, but also because the documents specifically detail the harrowing experiences of the victims, including their fears related to piracy, their failed attempts to muster the protection of their rulers, and, finally, their direct confrontation with the pirates themselves. The narrative gives further insight into some of the more opaque socio-historical aspects of medieval maritime violence. First, it has been suggested that Catalans had gained a reputation for piracy in the eastern Mediterranean by the later Middle

¹⁵⁰ For an overview of the late medieval maritime trade, see Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950-1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), and Benjamin Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis: Genoese and Venetian Men of Affairs and the Fourteenth-Century Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). For more historical background and documents on the maritime trade, see Robert S. Lopez and Irving Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World: Illustrative Documents Translated with Introduction and Notes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

¹⁵¹ In addition to the works on marque and reprisal above, some general work on medieval piracy includes: Maria Teresa Ferrer i Mallol, "Corso y piratería entre Mediterráneo y Atlántico en la Baja Edad Media," *La Península ibérica entre el Mediterráneo y el Atlántico. Siglos XIII-XV, V Jornadas Hispano-Portuguesas de Historia Medieval (Cádiz 1-4 abril 2003)* (Cádiz: Diputación de Cádiz, 2006); Michel Mollat, "Guerre de Course et piraterie à la fin du moyen âge: aspects économiques et sociaux. Position de problèmes," *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, XC (1972), 1-15; "Essai D'orientation Pour L'étude de La Guerre de Course et La Piraterie (XIIIe-XVe Siècles)," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 10 (1980), 743-49; Andrés Díaz Borrás, *Los orígenes de la piratería Islámica en Valencia: La ofensiva Musulmana trecentista y la reacción Cristiana* (Madrid and Barcelona: CSIC, 1996).

Ages.¹⁵² Interviews with the residents of Kythira suggest this reputation was indeed present in the early fourteenth century, and that the word “Catalan” had certain implications, at least in the seas around Greece. Secondly, it has long been recognized by historians that the line between merchant and pirate was ambiguously defined in late medieval Mediterranean culture, if not in law as well.¹⁵³ The Catalan merchants involved in this incident seem to have slipped with relative ease from legitimate mercantile activities to piracy and raiding. However, this case emphasizes that there was little ambiguity in the eyes of the victims, and if the witness testimonies are to be believed, the morality of their venture was questioned in the minds of at least one of the pirates as well. And finally, this case is remarkable for putting the voices of everyday people on the record, giving us the opportunity to see medieval life as it was lived by common folk on the peripheries. It shows us the traumatic impact one incident of piracy could have on a community and the lengths to which medieval people went in order to protect themselves and their communities from those who threatened them.

The documents for this case come from the diplomatic correspondences between Mallorca and Venice and the investigation conducted on Kythira on behalf of Venetian officials. They were preserved in the *Commemoriali* of the Archivio di Stato in Venice and later edited and published by Antoni Rubio i Lluch and Riccardo Predelli.¹⁵⁴ The story begins from the Mallorcans’ perspective, in a document from January of 1329 drawn up by Venetian officials, which included a copy of the sentence pronounced by the bailiff of Mallorca in 1326. According to the Mallorcan investors, “Francesc and Joan went to Greece, and there they evidently sold the cloth in the area of Thebes.”¹⁵⁵ They then bought Greek slaves, silk, and other mercantile goods and loaded them into the ship of some wine merchants from Barcelona with the intent of sailing to Cyprus to trade there. But after they left, “the fortune of the sea,” a common phrase usually indicating a storm or unfavorable winds, forced the merchants to stop off on the island of Kythira, about ten miles off the southern coast of the Peloponnesus. There, according to the investors’ testimonies, inhabitants of the island attacked the merchants, killing them and looting their ship. The profits from the Mediterranean slave trade were

¹⁵² Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis* 29-30; Kenneth Setton, *Catalan Domination of Athens, 1311-1388* (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1948), 248, 259.

¹⁵³ Robert I. Burns, “Piracy as an Islamic-Christian Interface in the Thirteenth Century,” *Viator* 11 (1980), 165; Kathryn Reyerson, “Identity in the Medieval Mediterranean World of Merchants and Pirates,” *Mediterranean Studies* 20 (2012), 131: “The transition from islander to pirate or from merchant to privateer, was not couched in dissembling, in role reversal, or in gender bending. It was clearly commonplace.” Frederick L. Cheyette, “The Sovereign and the Pirates,” *Speculum* 45, no. 1 (1970), 46. Lopez and Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, 221.

¹⁵⁴ *Diplomatari*, nos. 143, 145, 147, and 148; *Commemoriali* II, nos. 96, 129, 162, 165, 166, 171, 173, and 387.

¹⁵⁵ *Diplomatari*, no. 143; *Commemoriali* II, no. 96.

apparently worth a lot, in this case “a hundred and fifty *libra* per hundred invested, or more.” The total damages were determined by the assessor to be over eight-hundred Mallorcan *libra*, a very substantial sum. The inhabitants of Kythira were under the rule of the Republic of Venice, and so the bailiff of Mallorca, upon hearing the investors’ story, held Venice financially responsible for the loss.¹⁵⁶ In the meantime, he granted the investors the right to reprisal.

It appears to have taken a couple of years for the incident to gain the attention of Venetian officials; part of the reason they reviewed the case in 1329 was that King Jaume III of Mallorca had written the doge of Venice, Francisco Dandolo, asking about it.¹⁵⁷ This length of time was typical; medieval justice, especially when it required diplomatic action, was a slow-moving boat. But in May of that year the doge responded to the king: disturbed by the allegations brought against the Kythirans, he promised to order a full investigation. In the meantime, the king should send someone to Venice to procure the damages. He thanked the king and asked him to continue to protect Venetian mercantile activity in his realm.¹⁵⁸

The doge followed up on his promise. Later that month he wrote to the duke of Candia Joan Morosini, whose duchy included the island of Kythira:

[W]e were astonished to think it was just as the letters of the king explained, that so many of our own had committed such a digression. Nevertheless, we answered the king, wishing to provide for the security of our merchants living in his kingdom, that we had not heard of any of this business and that if any of his men came before us or our governors, we would give him the fullness of a favorable ruling.¹⁵⁹

Venice’s mercantile connections with Mallorca were important enough; Palma de Mallorca was a major port and stopping point on the way to ports in North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Atlantic.¹⁶⁰ The doge thus explicitly ordered the

¹⁵⁶ Venetians had been in control of Kythira since around 1204. In the late 1270’s, the half-Venetian admiral Licario conquered the island from the Venieri in the name of Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, who then gave the island to the Daimonoyannes family from Monemvasia. However, later a marriage treaty between that family and the Venieri brought the island back into Venetian hands in 1309. The four Venieri brothers who controlled the island later enticed Greek settlers from Venetian Crete by offering exemptions from taxes and service. See: Guillem Miller, *Latins in the Levant: A History of Frankish Greece (1204-1566)* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1908), 151, 565.

¹⁵⁷ *Commemoriali* II, no. 129.

¹⁵⁸ *Commemoriali* II, no. 162.

¹⁵⁹ *Diplomatari*, no. 145.

¹⁶⁰ David Abulafia, *A Mediterranean Emporium: The Catalan Kingdom of Mallorca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 168, 172, and chapter 10.

colonial lord to launch a full inquisition and see that justice be done, if needed. A month later the duke of Candia dispatched an unnamed scribe and investigator to Kythira to perform a formal inquisition into the supposed attack on the Catalan merchant ship.

The unnamed investigator arrived on Kythira in early July, 1329. On July 13th and 14th he interviewed fourteen people from around the island: a castellan, some serfs, some artisans, and some rural villagers, all who had something to say about the incident. The investigation followed the procedure of a late medieval inquisition, in which a judge-investigator sought out witnesses to an event, placed them under oath, and recorded their testimonies. These types of documents are common in the Mediterranean principalities, heavily influenced by the late medieval revival of Roman Law.¹⁶¹ What then arose in the investigation was quite a different story than that given to the Mallorcan bailiff by plaintiffs a few years earlier, and the testimonies of these poor islanders would nearly threaten to bring Venice and Mallorca to blows.

The first interview, on the 13th of July, 1329 took place at the “castle of Kythira,” the island’s administrative capitol at Kapsali; the subject was the former castellan himself, Blasio Simiteculo.¹⁶² He testified that a few years earlier a ship full of Catalans came ashore at the port of Avlemonas, a small cove on the eastern coast of the island.¹⁶³ People from a nearby village had come to his castle and told him that a pirate ship, a *lignum piratarum*, had come to the island and the pirates were causing great harm by stealing pigs, cows, and sheep. The castellan, from the beginning of his own testimony, seemed to have wanted to keep his distance from the incident. He quoted himself as saying, “why are you telling me these words? I

¹⁶¹ Daniel Lord Smail, *The Consumption of Justice: Emotions, Publicity, and Legal Culture in Marseilles, 1264-1423* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 33, 74; Linde Fowler-Magerl, *Ordines Iudicarii and Libelli de Ordine Iudiciorum (From the Middle of the Twelfth Through the End of the Fifteenth Century)*, *Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental* 63 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1994), 49-50; Marie Kelleher, *The Measure of Woman: Law and Female Identity in the Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 34. For an overview of Roman Law, see Manlio Bellomo, *The Common Legal Past of Europe: 1000-1800*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995); Jaume A. Brundage, *The Medieval Origins of the Legal Profession: Canonists, Civilians, and Courts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁶² *Diplomatari*, no. 147 n. 1. Rubio i Lluch says that the “castle of Kythira” was synonymous with modern Kapsali.

¹⁶³ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Blasio Simiteculo). Rubio i Lluch suggests that this port was near the church of St. Nicholas, still in existence on the northern tip of Kythira, because some testimonies used both names, Sanctus Nicolaus Aulemena, to describe the place. It should be noted that there is also a very old fishing village and natural cove called Avlemonas far to the southeast of St. Nicholas.

am having nothing to do with this!”¹⁶⁴ The people complaining were serfs, *villani*, and the castellan told them to complain to their steward, who was an abbot. Apparently they did, and a few days later this abbot himself came to the castellan with a few more serfs and further complained about the ship. “They do great damage to us,” the castellan remembered him saying, “they take animals by force on a daily basis; the men from the ship come out armed and run around, plundering things.”¹⁶⁵ The abbot asked the castellan to give him the aid of some of his castle guards so he could confront the Catalans, but the castellan refused: “you know well that I don’t have anything to do with what is beyond this castle. And the guards of this castle have to guard this castle. They cannot leave the castle to go fight with anyone. Thus, *in no way do I give you my guards!*” This kind of piratical raiding was apparently common on Kythira, as the castellan added, “certainly for one ship of pirates I would not send any guards out of the castle. Do not bother me with this again.” The abbot left, “agitated.” The castellan’s cold demeanor, which he himself described in his own testimony, suggests the distance he wanted to put between him and the incident. He knew that a fight had broken out between the islanders and the Catalans and admitted as much to the investigator; when he asked him if anyone had been killed or injured, the castellan responded that “he did not know because he did not want to know anything about it.”¹⁶⁶ Perhaps he knew that the incident, or at least incidents like these, could have larger legal and financial consequences. He remained either recalcitrant or blissfully ignorant about other details in the case.

A later witness would remark that the abbot, too, had at first resisted the idea of responding to the raid. “For one cow, what am I supposed to do?” he is said to have remarked.¹⁶⁷ This abbot had fled the island about a year earlier, for reasons unstated, and would not be available to testify, so the investigator moved on to interviewing the people living around the castle: a potter, a barber, and shoemaker. They all had stories relatively similar to that of the castellan and could recall little else. A castle guard said that he knew nothing other than what had already been said, and “did not care to ask about it, because the act did not pertain to servants of the castle.”¹⁶⁸ The shoemaker Marinus quoted the castellan as saying, “go away! If they take one or two pigs, they will not do any more damage to you.” He also remarked that the Catalans had “continually been capturing visiting ships,” and that

¹⁶⁴ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Blasio Simeticulo): “quare dicitis mihi hec verba?, ego nichil habeo ad faciendum de hoc.”

¹⁶⁵ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Blasio Simeticulo).

¹⁶⁶ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Blasio Simeticulo): “interrogatus si scit si aliquis ipsorum fuit interfectus, respondit quod aliud nescit, quia iste dixit ab inde in antea de hoc scire nolebat aliquid.”

¹⁶⁷ *Diplomatari* 147 (Yani Banchari): “pro uno bove, quid debemus facere?”

¹⁶⁸ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Johannes de Rena de Venetiis).

a fight had broken out between them and the islanders which caused deaths and injuries, but he did not know the details.

To get more information, the investigator would have to leave the castle and speak to people who were closer to the action, and for the next few days he visited rural villages and interviewed people there. It is at this point that we hear details of the villagers' defense strategies and learn that the reputation of the Catalans had preceded them. Seven more witnesses had largely corroborating testimonies, though some knew more details than others. After the Catalans had come ashore and began taking animals, the abbot had sent out runners to the various villages and castles on the island asking for help. The castellan had turned down his request for soldiers, so they would have to take to the task themselves and confront the invaders. One witness recounted the words of the crier:

[T]hese Catalans have disembarked and are going throughout the island capturing men in order to take them elsewhere and sell them. Whichever man holds our lords dear should come armed to that ship; if he does not possess arms, he should come tend to the medical needs of those who do.¹⁶⁹

Slave raiding was a typical piratical activity, but there is no mention in any of the testimonies that the Catalans had actually captured any of the islanders for those purposes.¹⁷⁰ The crier, knowing only that a ship of Catalans had disembarked on the island, filled in the details.

The general story from the witnesses was that about twenty men responded to the abbot's muster and gathered at the town of Mitata, near the center of the small island. When they went to confront the raiders, there were somewhere from nine to eleven pirates. The Catalans ran at them screaming, throwing spears and javelins. The islanders retreated, but not before more than ten were injured. Things were looking bad for the villagers as they laid there on the field, "as if mortally wounded;" but then a larger group of islanders, led by the abbot himself, showed up in reserve and gave battle to the Catalans. Most dramatically, while the beaten and wounded Kythirans were fleeing from the Catalans, one witness had the abbot show up with a large number of men saying, "what are you thinking? Upon them!"¹⁷¹ The islanders fought with "bows and sling" while the Catalans fought with "crossbows and javelins," and "many were wounded." One islander, a herder named Nikolas Faxe, was killed in the skirmish.

¹⁶⁹ Diplomatarium 147 (Yani Banchari).

¹⁷⁰ See Debra Blumenthal, *Enemies and Familiars: Slavery and Mastery in Fifteenth-Century Valencia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); or Jarbel Rodriguez, *Captives and Their Saviors in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

¹⁷¹ Diplomatarium 147 (Theodoro Castrigo).

The islanders finally changed the tide of the battle and some of the Catalans fled, “but others stood their ground and were killed.” The Kythirans chased the fleeing Catalans back to their ship, where the fighting continued. In the final fracas, most of the Catalans were killed; one or two may have escaped and later fled to the mainland. The Catalans had slaves in their ship, and when the islanders arrived and defeated the raiders, the slaves “saw that the Catalans were killed, took the sail, cut it up, and covered themselves because they were naked and hungry. The ship had no food other than what was stolen.”¹⁷² And they too escaped and went on their way. The islanders disbanded, returned home, and the pirates’ ship sat moored in the port until it rotted from neglect and fell apart. No one was apparently willing to do anything with it; the islanders themselves were not interested in committing piracy by stealing someone else’s ship.

The documents record the attitudes of the Kythirans toward piracy: the authorities were apathetic and regarded it as something of a petty crime; the islanders, on the other hand, risked injury and death to ward them off, and at least one person sacrificed his life. Interestingly, even among the pirates themselves there seems to have been a debate over the morality of their endeavor. Five witnesses mention a Venetian man among the Catalan raiders, named Donato. According to witnesses, he had a crisis of conscience when his shipmates decided to stop off on a Venetian-owned island and plunder. One witness claimed that he went and found a local herder in the countryside, and told him “guard yourself against those Catalans. They are bad men. They have a ship full of slaves and they go around plundering islands.”¹⁷³ The herder, of course, reported this to the abbot. Two witnesses heard differently and had the Venetian coming directly to the abbot and telling him that he should be aware of the Catalans, “because they rush through Venetian islands trapping men; they put them in their ship and then put them up for sale.”¹⁷⁴ Another one put it, “if you are not careful, they will take men from the island and sail off with them; that is how they got those other slaves.”¹⁷⁵ This Venetian, or at least the islanders who recounted his story, knew the reputation of Catalans in those parts.

The islanders’ accounts of this Venetian raider suggest that a shared identity was present on Kythira which linked the islanders to their Venetian rulers, complicating what would otherwise have been a simple piratical raid. One witness testified that when the pirates arrived on the island, and the Venetian Donato realized it was Kythira, he turned to his Catalan comrades and said, “you are acting wickedly. It is more than enough that you steal their things—do not try to attack

¹⁷² *Diplomatari* 147 (Hemanuel Patrologo).

¹⁷³ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Theodoro Castrigo).

¹⁷⁴ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Paulo Polodondi).

¹⁷⁵ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Georgio Cherperioti).

them. This is a Venetian island!”¹⁷⁶ The Catalans called him a “traitor” and tried to kill him, according to that account. It was at this point, according to the witness, that Donato came to the islanders and warned them about his shipmates’ capacity for raiding and capturing slaves. This same witness gave the mostly-Greek inhabitants of Kythira a Venetian identity, inserting at certain points an incredulity that Catalans would attack them. In his version of the story, the abbot wanted to gather a group of men “so that they might go to those Catalans and learn the reason they are robbing Venetian people,” *homines Venetorum*.¹⁷⁷ When they confronted the raiders, they asked them “why do you plunder us? We are Venetian people!”¹⁷⁸ Another witness also added, “we are Venetians, yet you still killed our cattle!”¹⁷⁹ The reluctant Venetian pirate apparently survived the skirmish and later took a ship to Crete. Perhaps this is how some of the islanders heard a version of his story.

If the islanders were Venetians, or at least “Venetians’ men,” the invaders in the narrative were squarely identified as Catalans. Medieval discourses often identified people by their ethno-linguistic origins, but this hints at something more, namely, the identification of Catalans with piracy and with the slave trade. Benjamin Kedar, in *Merchants in Crisis*, remarked on what he considered to be the exceptional brutality of Catalan pirates.¹⁸⁰ For him, the regular back-and-forth competition of the Italian merchant cities was interrupted by the arrival of the indiscriminate Catalans in the late thirteenth century, who pirated so much over the next hundred years that they threatened to destroy the slave trade altogether by the 1380’s. Several decades before Kedar, Kenneth Setton had similarly described the exceptional slaving activities of the Catalans, claiming that the word “Catalan” was still used as an epithet equating to “a giant, monster or vampire” even in the early twentieth century.¹⁸¹ Indeed, the rapid entrance of Catalans into the mercantile scene in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century was accompanied by violence, in the conquests of Mallorca and Valencia, wars in Sicily, and eventually the conquests of Athens and Thebes. The warriors originating from the highlands of Catalonia, known as *almogàvers*, were instrumental in these campaigns and were known for their use of javelins in combat.¹⁸² The testimonies from the Kythirans

¹⁷⁶ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Theodoro Castrigo): “vos male facitis, quia bene sufficit quod vos accipitis res suas, atamen nolite eos verberare quia ista insula est Venetorum.”

¹⁷⁷ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Theodoro Castrigo). Another witness, Hemanuel Patrologo, has them using the same phrase, *homines Venetorum*.

¹⁷⁸ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Georgio Cherperioti).

¹⁷⁹ *Diplomatari*, no. 147 (Hemanuel Patrologo). “qua de causa derobatis nos, quia sumus homines Venetorum, et etiam interfecistis nostrum pecorarium.”

¹⁸⁰ Kedar, *Merchants in Crisis*, 29-30.

¹⁸¹ Kenneth Setton, *Catalan Domination of Athens*, 248.

¹⁸² Bernat Desclot, *Chronicle of the Reign of King Peter III of Aragon, 1276-85*, trans. F.L. Critchlow (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1928), chapter LXXIX.

depict an awareness of these violent tropes associated with Catalans, and the islanders seem to have associated them with the slave trade as well.

The investigator concluded his interviews after two days in the countryside and the investigation documents eventually made their way back to Venice. Based on this new report Venetian authorities refused to pay anything to the Mallorcan investors who had begun the case. Pressure seems to have been mounting: only a month later, in August of 1329, king Jaume of Mallorca again wrote to Venice, thanking the doge for ordering an investigation but apparently yet unaware that it had already taken place and turned out poorly for his merchants. After this, no record of the case appears again in the Venetian records until an entry in the *Commemoriali* from July 5, 1336. In the interim the dispute had apparently escalated severely. Venice had obviously offered no restitution because of the investigation's findings, yet the Mallorcan investigators had continued to push their case and, with help from officials in Mallorca, enacted the reprisal upon Venetian merchants mentioned above. According to the document, many Venetians doing business in Mallorca had faced penalties and seizures because of the case; specifically, eight Venetian galleys had been stopped on their way to Flanders and subjected to a tax. There were protests, and the Venetian government threatened to withdraw its citizens from Mallorca altogether. A group of Mallorcans and a Venetian representative held a deposition to settle the dispute, and they ruled strongly in favor of the Venetians. Officials in Mallorca would cease any further claims on behalf of Jaume Cama and Simó Berenguer; their right to reprisal, as given by the Mallorcan bailiff, was revoked. Mallorcans were to pay back all the taxes and confiscations they had taken from the Venetians, amounting to 2000 Mallorcan *libra*—far more than the investors had initially demanded a decade earlier. The document ends with sworn statements from Mallorcans promising to pay the sum back.¹⁸³ It is unknown whether anyone in Mallorca tried to dispute the Venetians' investigation; it certainly appears that they persisted in their push for compensation long after the investigation had taken place.

In the end it seems that the kingdom of Mallorca, with its larger economic and diplomatic interests in mind, did not wish to pursue the matter any further, and this case demonstrates how a relatively small incident of maritime violence could have far-reaching consequences. The case caught the attention of the leadership of Venice, a dominant Christian naval and mercantile power in the eastern Mediterranean, and Mallorca, a potent merchant-kingdom in its own right; it nearly caused a major disruption in their diplomatic relations. Still more interesting is how the case demonstrates the different ways medieval people saw piracy: as a nuisance, as a serious threat, and as a lucrative adventure. Piracy was so common in places

¹⁸³ *Commemoriali*, no. 387.

like Kythira that officials on both the local and regional level were reluctant to deal with it, as if it were unenforceable. Both the islanders and the Mallorcan investors demonstrated their capacities for self-help, taking matters into their own hands when official avenues proved unhelpful. As for the raiders themselves, they seemed to cross rather easily between piratical and mercantile activities. But pirate identities are not assumed without consequences.