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**Navigating the Amoral Fluidity of the Early Modern Mediterranean: Noel Malcolm's *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits & Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean***  
**Oxford University Press, 2015, 640 pp.**

One of the most prominent concerns of our time is the cultural conflict between Islam and the West. Or at least, this is the way in which certain observers have characterized the relation between these two groups: a clash of civilizations, whose respective politics are based on cultural identities. The roots of this clash lie, on the one hand, in the fear of losing aspects of their cultural identity—or what is perceived as such—through hybridization with the traditions and values of an alien group. On the other, this view seems to be the result of an unsuccessful intercultural communication, which often leads one group to despise the “other,” or to wonder whether acknowledged different habits and beliefs could ever coexist. The success of xenophobic political parties throughout Europe and beyond, as much as the simultaneous growing popularity of religious fundamentalism, especially among young and marginalized people, testify how these nationalist narratives drive consensus. Arguably, such views express ideological narrowness and historical myopia, as they uncritically take the cultural identity as an innate feature of a given group, rather than a constructed image that, at best, crystallizes a phase in the modernizing process of said group. Deconstructing cultural identities helps to understand their composed, idiosyncratic, and, most of all, processual nature. But how to do so? Noel Malcolm, in his *Agents of Empire: Knights, Corsairs, Jesuits, & Spies in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean World*, without making any explicit claims, offers his take on these present concerns by investigating early modern times. His work focuses, as the subtitle says, on the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century. More precisely, he examines the histories of two related Albanian families, at

times stretching the Mediterranean boundaries even further than Fernand Braudel did in his masterpiece *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.<sup>1</sup>

We can say that the Mediterranean needs no introduction: it is traditionally seen as the molding context for Western civilization and its major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is the arena *par excellence* in which the clash between what has been called the Western and the Islamic civilizations took place—and still takes—and, consequently, where the tropes of their respective cultural identities have been shaped. Of course, such narratives tend to minimize or fully neglect the mutual exchanges between them, and the porosity of their identities.

Albania, although adjacent to Greece and a stone's throw from Italy, nonetheless functions as a peripheral territory within the Mediterranean. A borderland between the Ottoman and the Venetian Empires, a mélange of languages, creeds, and ethnicities, Albania's identity has often been defined for what is not. Even in more recent times, it has been cornered between the Yugoslavian behemoth and the Greek's military regime. Oddly, Albania is seldom remembered as the land of the Illyrians, or the vital center it was for the Byzantine Empire; even the reasons behind Gabriele D'Annunzio's expression *mutilated victory*—coined after the failed annexation of Albania to the Italian Kingdom in 1919—and the subsequent invasion ordered by Mussolini in 1939, are often played down as expressions of the outlandish aspirations of the fascist regime.

The sixteenth century is, perhaps because of Braudel, *the* Mediterranean century. Or at least, it is the century of its supposed swan song, before the western world turned to the Atlantic. The clashes between the Christian European powers and the Ottoman Empire climaxed in 1571 with the notorious Battle of Lepanto. After that, the Mediterranean reached some sort of stability, with the Adriatic firmly in the hands of the Venetians, while the southeastern reaches of the Sea largely under

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<sup>1</sup> *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II* (A. Colin, 1949)

Ottoman control. Or so it is said. Perhaps this could be incidental, but the archives of the imperial centers and the subject cities alike offer many more records from the sixteenth century onward, and, consequently, more resources for the scholars to identify crucial turning points in history.

Malcolm problematizes all these assumptions. His work is the result of painstaking and meticulous research in both “imperial” and peripheral archives, moving comfortably across ten different languages and several historiographical traditions. The result echoes both the constant moving nature and a continuous zoom-in/zoom-out focus of his research. *Agents of Empire* is also a work that reflects the author’s trenchant engagement with the geopolitical situation of the Balkans, in particular with the question of nationalism and nationalist historical narratives, on which he has written profusely.<sup>2</sup> Malcolm adopts a microhistorical approach, following the Albanian families Bruni and Bruti, their careers, successes, and tragedies, and their connections with the most relevant figures and events of their time, along with their mobility throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. In a way, the subject of his study becomes his methodology: by chasing the social, familial, professional, and geographical trajectories of these Albanian kin, Malcolm pursues two goals. On the one hand, he manages to give individual agency a role in the history of empires and the Mediterranean, a dimension foreign to the systemic view of Fernand Braudel, or to the “human history” as recounted in David Abulafia’s *The Great Sea*.<sup>3</sup> On the other, he is able to keep Albania and the Albanian perspective central to the analysis of a broader history. *Agents of Empire* is in fact not merely a work on the history of the Albanian coast. It is not simply a history *in* the Mediterranean, and it cannot be a history *of* the Mediterranean, to use Peregrine Horden and

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<sup>2</sup> *Bosnia: A Short History* (New York University Press, 1994); *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York University Press, 1998). Aleksa Djilas, former Fellow of the Russian Research Center at Harvard University, wrote in his review of *Kosovo on Foreign Affairs* (77-5: 1998) that Malcolm's book was "marred by his sympathies for its ethnic Albanian separatists, anti-Serbian bias, and illusions about the Balkans"

<sup>3</sup> David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Nicholas Purcell's<sup>4</sup> words. What stands out amazingly in Malcolm's work is how the experiences of the Brutis and the Brunis, collectively as much as individually, are intertwined with the history of the Mediterranean and the powers in play there; how a thoroughly researched microscopic dimension can shed light on the macroscopic one, when the two are considered together; and, to go back to the primitive purpose of this work, how this early modern history can be helpful to analyze present concerns on the Mediterranean, on the southern Balkans, and on the "clash of civilization" between the so-called West and Islam, with an anti-nationalist perspective.

Albania offers a privileged perspective for such an inquiry, and in recent years scholars from varied backgrounds have turned their attention to the eastern coast of the Adriatic and its population living between empires, religions, and languages. Eric Dursteler and Natalie Rothman have stressed the porosity of the borders between the Venetian Republic and the Ottoman Empire—and to a lesser extent the Habsburg one—s," highlighting the culturally and linguistically amphibious nature of their peoples. In particular, from their works emerge the capacity of—certain—individuals to take advantage of their in-between position to successfully navigate amidst empires.<sup>5</sup> These "transimperial subjects" acted as cultural brokers, translating—culturally and linguistically—one world to the other, as, indeed, agents of empire(s). Alina Payne's recently edited *Dalmatia and the Mediterranean: Portable Archaeology and the Poetics of Influence*, another fascinating book that belongs to the same body of literature, although focusing on architecture and art history, and perhaps with a more radical agenda (i.e. showing how Dalmatia became an experimental hotbed for the art of the

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<sup>4</sup> Peregrine Horden, Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Blackwell, 2000)

<sup>5</sup> Eric Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); "Speaking in Tongues: Multilingualism and Multicultural Communication in the Early Modern Mediterranean" in *Past & Present* 217 (2012). Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Cornell University Press, 2015).

Mediterranean empires).<sup>6</sup> The latter also adds a dimension that is not fully developed, if not completely absent, in the former works, which is the use of Ottoman sources. However, such a lacuna should not be irrefutably stigmatized. In fact, although the main reason for these historians to silence Turkish sources is their lack of familiarity with the Ottoman language, it is also true that the surviving archives of the Porte do not offer as many details about the southern Dalmatian periphery of its empire as much as the “Latin” archives do. This is in part related to the fact that a great number of local Ottoman archives have been destroyed in the past century in the turbulence generated by the shaping of nationalistic identities in the Balkan region. It is also, however, related to the very nature of Ottoman bureaucracy, which filtered the information to transmit according to the level of communication. Hence, peripheral details about villages or subjects were considered omissible minutiae for the Divan.

This long introduction serves for framing the stories of the individuals to whom Malcolm gives voice, after centuries of silence, and understanding them *in* the Mediterranean context, as *agents* of the historical context itself.

In twenty-two chapters, Malcolm brings back to life several members of the two Albanian families. For instance, Antonio Bruti, who, with his complex personal networks across the Venetian-Ottoman border, oversaw the critical trade of grain to Venice, and acted as broker between the two empires. His son Bartolomeo, after an attempted career as dragoman—translator—straddled the line as intelligence agent between Venice and Spain in Istanbul. Later, thanks to the familial bound with the soon-to-be Grand Vizier, became the right-hand man of the Moldavian Voivode, before being killed in his mid-thirties. One of his nephews, Pasquale, broke into the dragoman profession, traveling

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<sup>6</sup> Alina Payne (ed.), *Dalmatia and the Mediterranean: Portable Archaeology and the Poetics of Influence* (Brill, 2014)

through Hungary with the English ambassador in Istanbul and Mehmet III, but was killed like his uncle, for he was suspected of being a spy.

Malcolm offers perhaps the best example framing the fortunes and misfortunes of two brothers, Giovanni and Gasparo Bruni, and their eventual encounter, on opposite sides of the conflict, at the Battle of Lepanto. Giovanni Bruni was Primate of Serbia and Archbishop of Antivari (Bar), in what was then called *Albania Veneta*, the southernmost possession of the Most Serene Republic—today the coast of Montenegro—after the Ottoman conquest of Scutari (Shkodër, 1479) and Durazzo (Durrës, 1501). For his wealth of experience gained serving the Catholic Church on a frontier exposed not only to believers of Islam and Greek Orthodox faith, but also to “Lutheran heretics” who were causing “great confusion in the near Dulcigno (Ulcinj),” and possibly for the friendship he had with Carlo Borromeo, nephew of the Pope and soon to be one of the most prominent figures of the Counter-Reformation, he was invited to participate to the Council of Trent. Once back in Bar, he applied Counter-Reformistic teachings with such zeal that he received a reprimand from the Pope. He strenuously fought the Turks in August 1571 with his nephew Nicolò, stradiot commander of Ulcinj. When the city was taken, he was held captive and enslaved as a rower on one of the Ottoman ships—most likely the *Sultana*—which fought at Lepanto. He met there his death with many other fellow enslaved rowers by the hands of a Spanish mariner, who deliberately ignored his plea “I’m a bishop, I’m a Christian.”

The life of Gasparo did not lag behind his brother’s. Ostensibly the first Albanian admitted into the Knights of Malta—thus becoming subject of the Pope and vassal of the king of Spain—Gasparo worked for the Pope as an intelligence agent in Dubrovnik. There he supplied vital information to Phillip II about the fact that Istanbul was considering supporting the Moriscos’ rebellion in Spain. Later he became captain on the flagship of the Holy League and right hand of Marcantonio Colonna, with whom he fought the famous Battle of Lepanto, while his brother was in chains in an

enemy ship. Shortly after having served Colonna, he was sent in France, to defend the papal enclave of Avignon from the Huguenots.

Malcolm takes the reader by hand and tells the stories of these characters with superb narrative skills. Yet, reconstructing the lives of the Bruni brothers is just part of his agenda, and not his final goal. Showing how mobile and interconnected these Albanians were surely serve his purpose of bringing Albanians and their history to the center of the Mediterranean. The fact that both Gasparo and Giovanni took part to some of the most relevant events of the century, and not necessarily on the sidelines, allows the author to stress the familial strategies employed by the Brunis—and the Brutis—to play on the international stage, taking advantage of, rather than suffering the limitations of their borderland origins. The Battle of Lepanto gives him the opportunity to add as well a tragic, almost cinematographic literary device to capture the reader's imagination: by describing the violent death of Giovanni, enslaved in an Ottoman ship, while his brother Gasparo, unaware of it, was enjoying the triumph less than a hundred yards away is a plausible fiction, rather than a fictitious fabrication. The ways in which Malcolm reconstructs the puzzle of the two brother's stories, discovering all the little pieces digging deep in a myriad of archives, chronicles, and secondary literature is fascinating and impressive. Not only does it show his remarkable research skills, but it also makes apparent the strength of his empirical, yet original method: following the Brunis and Brutis in the Mediterranean and beyond *is* Malcolm's methodological approach.

Repeatedly moving his narrative camera from a small detail to the surrounding landscape grants him as well the opportunity to sketch—but more often to examine in depth—countless aspects of the sixteenth-century Mediterranean which entered, in a way or another, into the stories he tells. The author does not limit himself to paint vividly the historical backdrop, surveying the Battle of Lepanto, the Council of Trent, the Huguenots' revolt, but he also takes advantage of every

opportunity to shed light on more specific topics: from engineering details about shipbuilding, to the dynamics related to slavery and ransoming; from the meaning of customs such as gift-giving in the early modern Mediterranean, to the constitution and the hierarchy of the Knights of Malta; from the description of stradiot military corps, to the political Ottoman agenda of supporting the Moriscos' revolts in Spain (and obviously, the Moriscos are described in detail too). Malcolm's erudition seems to address almost any question a reader may ask or even think. He is aware of how potentially remote the Mediterranean and its periphery could be for some of his readers (especially, since he wrote "with non-specialist readers primarily in mind"), and the wealth of details that he offers provide more than enough information to give anyone the opportunity to have an informed understanding of that world.

Following every possible strand the narration offers him may have, nonetheless, some drawbacks. All those digressions at times risk making the whole narrative nebulous, and I fear that instead of illustrating the broader context, they just overpopulate it. Moreover, the publisher's choice to place all the footnotes for each chapter at the end of the book, although space-saving, may discourage even the most curious reader from pursuing further investigation on any subject. Yet, once one adjusts himself or herself to navigate this ocean of information, *Agents of Empire* can make some serious points, both at the micro and macro level, and for both the scholar of early modern Mediterranean and the amateur reader alike. The microhistorical approach offers, for instance, a key to unpack nationalist narratives which still affect the understanding of the relationship between, say, Albania and Italy, offering food for thought regarding the otherwise obscure interests of the Kingdom of Italy in that small country on the south-eastern coast of the Adriatic, or to define the roots of the ethnical and religious conflict between Albania, Kosovo and Serbia at the turn of the twenty-first century. Malcolm does not necessarily offer answers beyond the scenario he is analyzing, but I believe that he subtly guides the reader to reflect on broader and more present issues.



Going back to the explicit subject of the book, for anyone who investigated Dalmatian and Albanian families, the trajectories of the Brunis and Brutis may sound exceptional for they have participated to the most relevant events of the sixteenth century, right next to sultans, popes, kings and queens. The dynamics though will be quite familiar. The Bolizzas from Kotor, for instance, just fifty miles north from Ulcinj, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries built their fortune between empires: they acted as diplomatic intermediators between Venice and the Porte, and, “cultural amphibians” like the Brunis and Brutis, negotiated on behalf of both the Ottomans and the Most Serene Republic with the populations living in the mountainous territories of today’s Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia. As intelligence agents, they kept both Venice and the Viceroy of Naples informed about the secret military operations of the Turks, and sometimes they warned Bosnian’ pashas about rumors of a Spanish invasion of Albania. They managed the official correspondence between Venice and Istanbul recruiting subjects of both Empires. They cut deals with traders and pirates, and/or with Ottoman and Venetian representatives to fight them and regulate commerce (while keeping alive salt bootlegging with papal territories). They sent members of their family to Rome, to expand their network among the clergy, and to Padua, where one of them became rector of the University. Even the inflated autobiographical memoranda presented by Malcolm resonate with those of the Bolizzas.

This common pattern may be helpful to reflect on the Albanian/Montenegrin early modern society, their shifting identities—the Bolizzas called themselves Dalmatians, Venetians, people from Kotor, or Albanian, according to what was more convenient—their fluid loyalties, their capacity not only to survive, but to thrive in that borderland between empires which constantly call each other infidels, and reciprocate threats of annihilation. Brunis and Brutis, if individually often upheld their beliefs with zeal, collectively their families acted differently. In other words, each individual’s identity became key for the success of the family when their diversity was strategically combined. The Bruni

brothers were Venetian subjects. Giovanni was a man of Church, firm Roman Catholic, and loyal to the Pope; his brother Gasparo a man of arms, a spy, a knight of Malta, associated with both the Pope and the king of Spain. Their sister married Antonio Bruti, whose networks ranged from Venice to Istanbul. His son Bartolomeo, although serving as intelligence agent both Venice and later Spain, was supported and protected by Muslim officers, one of whom, Sinan Pasha, was related to his family. Pasquale, Antonio's nephew, served as the dragoman of the English ambassador, closely connected with Ottoman and Habsburg rulers. For all of them, Christianity mattered, "but in most cases [their belief] did not direct their lives, nor did it prevent some of them from cultivating their connection with a powerful relative who was a Muslim convert." Being Albanian Catholics, they understood that their daily business and the long term trajectories for their families should deal with the Ottoman neighbors, that "Christian jihadist" thoughts were highly unrealistic and not necessarily desirable, and that their individual identities, as much as their familial one, required to be conceived as fluid and flexible.

Zooming out, as Malcolm does repeatedly, to the wider context of Mediterranean politics, it is possible to recognize similar attitudes especially in the relationships between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. Economic and commercial interests, as much as the administration of their respective subjects in the Dalmatian and Albanian borderlands, required unprincipled and amoral political strategies to encompass, and actually take advantage of the cultural differences within their own empires.

Malcolm does not explicitly present a political or ideological agenda for his work. He barely, if ever, uses the concept of *identity*, which may seem odd given the subject of his book. He privileges instead the socio-geopolitically determined concept of *culture*, giving emphasis to the driving forces that he recognizes in the micro (and macro) histories he reconstructs: multidirectional mobility and

interconnectedness. Moreover, the author presents a plethora of successful examples in which material and social concerns led both lives of individuals and international relationships, sidelining or even dismissing moral and religious principles, and he is keen to highlight negative consequences of religious doggedness. For instance, he shows that in several occasions Venice employed Ottoman soldiers. When the Venetian *Terraferma* was conquered by the League of Cambrai in 1509, the Republic seriously considered the hiring of an Ottoman army. It did not happen, but not because it was unacceptable to employ Muslim soldiers, but because it would have “destroy[ed] Venice’s image as a defender of Christendom.” It is telling that Malcolm illustrates the Ottoman involvement in the two major wars described in the book—1570-73 against Venice and the Holy League and 1593-1606 against the Habsburg—in terms of realpolitik, rather than framing the conflict as religiously motivated. On the contrary, he openly blames the Emperor for stubbornly rejecting the Ottoman’s reasonable terms for peace; further, Malcolm describes papal plans for holy wars, using terms such as “Christian jihad,” “fantasy-scenarios,” and “unrealistic plans.” In this light, his repulsion towards the concept of identity becomes clearer: for him identity negates the flexible, shifting, and processual nature that he identifies in the Mediterranean world, because it cannot exist dissociated from moral and/or religious principles.

To sum up, the greatness of *Agents of Empire* far exceeds its importance in the historiography of the Mediterranean. I read it as a work in which Malcolm gives to his readers the opportunity to reconsider present concerns in more nuanced ways. He rejects *identity* not only for being an inherently modern concept, and thus inadequate and misleading in the analysis of an early modern world—let alone the spurious world he describes—but also for being the core for the fabrication of nationalism and interrupting the intercultural communication. In fact, the book makes clear that in sixteenth century Albania, the interplay between different ethnic and religious components did not follow those exclusive unidirectional dynamics which constitute the foundations of the nationalist-

tainted bloodshed in the aftermath of Yugoslavia's collapse. But I want to stretch the reach of Malcolm's work even further. Why shouldn't we read *Agents of Empire* and the amoral politics within it as an alternative proposal to deal with conflictual diversity, both at the micro and macro level? I believe that Malcolm, describing the overall successful effects of shifting identities and fluid loyalties that characterized the multicultural, transnational and interconnected Mediterranean world, sows a seed for a critique of identity politics, for they tend to polarize the political landscape.