A TEST CASE FOR REGIONAL MARKET INTEGRATION? THE GRAIN TRADE BETWEEN MALTA AND SICILY IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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"*Malta is very fortunate for this one reason, namely that Sicily, very fertile in all kinds of grain, lies nearby and is for the inhabitants as good as a granary, where otherwise they would die of hunger*."[1]

I

The economy of medieval Europe is increasingly studied in the context of a "commercialist" or Smithian framework.[2] This approach emphasizes the role of trade in promoting a greater division of labor in town and countryside, the expansion of commercial activity, and the progressive integration and greater sophistication of regional market networks. Towns perform a crucial role in these models, whereby urban demand for foodstuffs stimulates specialization and higher levels of productivity in agriculture, as well as more efficient distribution of resources. Yet while few would dispute the increased commercialization and sophistication of the late medieval economy generally, the extent and effect of these changes at a regional or local level is less clear. Legal, institutional or social barriers represented transaction costs that could significantly limit the flow of trade or access to markets. In the fifteenth century, the kingdom of Sicily—of which the Maltese Islands formed part—was a politically

[1] J. Quintin D'Autun, *Insulae Melitae descriptio* (Lyons 1536), ed. with trans. in H. R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536)* (Malta: DeBono Enterprises, 1980), 35.

[2] For instance, R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000-1500*, 2nd. ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); J. Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England, 1150-1350* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). For an exposition of the commercialist approach, J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages. The History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 121-73.

unified state with a relatively commercialized economy. It has recently been argued that during the late Middle Ages Sicily's internal markets became progressively more integrated. In the course of this paper I wish to discuss the extent of this economic integration by highlighting some obstacles that disrupted the trade in grain between Sicily and Malta during much of the fifteenth century.

II

The important role of Sicily in the grain trade of the medieval Mediterranean is well known.[3] At one time or another, Sicilian wheat was exported to cities in northern Italy (particularly Florence and Genoa), France and Spain and occasionally even to north Africa.[4] Sicily's Norman, Angevin and Aragonese rulers took an active interest in the commercial exploitation of this vital commodity, fully aware of the substantial revenues that its export brought into their coffers. Since the reign of Frederick II, the grain trade was channeled through specially designated ports known as *caricatori*, most of them located in the western half of the island where much of the

[3] M. De Boüard, "Problèmes de subsistance dans un état médiéval: le marché et les prix des céréales au royaume angevin de Sicile (1266-1282)," *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* 10 (1938): 483-501; M. Aymard, "Il commercio dei grani nella Sicilia del '500," *Archivio storico per la Sicilia orientale* 72 (1975): 7-40; D. Abulafia, "Sul commercio del grano siciliano nel tardo Duecento," in *La società mediterranea all'epoca del Vespro: XI Congresso della Corona d'Aragona, Palermo-Trapani-Erice, 25-30 Aprile 1982*, vol. 2 (Palermo: Accademia di Scienze, Lettere e Arti, 1983), 5-22, repr. in D. Abulafia, *Italy, Sicily and the Mediterranean 1100-1400* (London: Variorum, 1987), essay VII; O. Cancila, *Baroni e popolo nella Sicilia del grano* (Palermo: Palumbo, 1983); H. Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen: économie et societé en Sicile, 1300-1450*, 2 vols. (Rome-Palermo: Bibliothéques des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 1986); S. R. Epstein, *An Island for Itself: Economic Development and Social Change in Late Medieval Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). On the Mediterranean grain trade in the Middle Ages, P. Wolff, "Un grand commerce médiéval: les céréales dans le bassin de la Méditerranée occidentale: Remarques et suggestions," *VI Congreso de la Corona de Aragon, Cerdeña* (Madrid: n.p., 1959), 147-74; M. Tangheroni, *Aspetti dei commercio dei cereali nei Paesi della Corona d'Aragona*, I. *La Sardegna* (Pisa-Cagliari: Pacini, 1981).

[4] D. Abulafia, *The Two Italies: Economic Relations between the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and the Northern Communes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); D. Abulafia, "Lo stato e la vita economica," in P. Toubert and A. Paravicini, ed., *Federico II e il mondo mediterraneo* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1994), 165-187; M. Del Treppo, *I mercanti catalani e l'espansione della Corona d'Aragona nel secolo XV* (Naples: L'Arte Tipografica Napoli, 1972).

grain was grown.[5] Sicily produced at least three types of wheat by the sixteenth century but the hard variety (*grano duro*) was especially prized for its capacity to resist rot while remaining in storage for several years.[6] The island's reputation as a major grain producer was indeed well-founded. In the late thirteenth century annual export levels averaged 20,000 to 30,000 *salme* and perhaps around 40,000 *salme* in the following century (1 *salma* = 2.75 hl).[7] Some 122,000 *salme* were shipped out of Sicilian ports in 1407-1409 but this may have been an exceptional year.[8] An average of 50,000 *salme* was probably typical throughout the 1460s with a maximum of 90,000-100,000 *salme* in the 1490s.[9] Nonetheless, in spite of these impressive figures, estimates put grain exports at less than ten per cent of domestic output, occasionally reaching a maximum share of fifteen per cent.[10] It seems therefore that most of the grain produced in Sicily was consumed locally. A system of land and (more importantly) sea transport linked the *caricatori* of Sciacca, Agrigento and Licata to the two main cities of Palermo, Messina and to smaller centers such as Trapani, Syracuse and Catania. Unlike northern Italy, however, where urban centers frequently obtained jurisdictional authority over the surrounding their *contado* and its resources, Sicilian cities, with the partial exception of Messina, had little direct control over their hinterland. Stephan Epstein believes that, given their inability to rely on institutional privileges for economic and human resources, Sicily's towns and cities were forced to obtain these resources on a competitive basis.[11] However, this state of affairs, as Epstein himself concedes, did not apply in the case of a strategic and relatively scarce commodity such as grain.

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[5] Abulafia, "Lo stato," 165-87.

[6] Cancila, *Baroni*, 44.

[7] Bresc, *Un monde*, 127-8.

[8] Cancila, *Baroni,* 16; C. Trasselli, "Sull'esportazione dei cereali dalla Sicilia negli anni 1402-1407," *Annali della Facoltà di Economia e Commercio dell'Università di Palermo* 11 (1957): 217-52, repr. in C. Trasselli, *Mediterraneo e Sicilia all'inizio dell'epoca moderna. (Ricerche quattrocentesche)* (Cosenza: Pellegrini Editore, 1977), 331-70.

[9] Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, 274.

[10] Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, 275; Cancila, *Baroni*, 20 reaches similar conclusions.

[11] Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, 133; S. R. Epstein, "Town and Country: Economy and Institutions in Late Medieval Italy," *Economic History Review* 46 (3) (1993): 453-77.

In 1392 Martin I of Aragon invaded Sicily in order to restore royal authority and put an end to years of wars and internal political instability.[12] The Aragonese monarchy also took steps to revive Sicily's economy and promote inter-regional trade by establishing new fairs, standardizing weights and measurements, and reducing tolls on internal trade.[13] Among the latter measures was a decree passed in 1398 which stated that no *tratte* or trade permits were to be paid on grain exchanged *intra regno* and hence destined for internal consumption. Indications are, however, that Sicily's domestic grain market remained quite fragmented throughout much of the fifteenth century. In this case at least, the monarchy appears to have been unable or reluctant to consistently enforce institutional reforms favoring more open markets. This is hardly surprising given that, in order to do so, the state often needed to act against powerful and entrenched local or sectional interests including monopoly rights of feudal lords and protectionist measures by individual cities.[14] In fifteenth-century Messina, the grain trade was effectively controlled by local municipal officials who not only decided the price at which grain was to be sold in the city but frequently also owned the very estates from where that grain was bought.[15] My own research based on the notarial archives of Sciacca, one of the principal outlets for the export of grain in Sicily, suggests that the interests of the local authorities were often in conflict with those who had grain for sale because the latter found it more profitable to sell their stocks to Catalan, Genoese and other foreign merchants. The grain reserves of many cities were frequently low and any interruption in the supply chain could provoke considerable hardships for the inhabitants. For instance, Catania's annual grain requirements in the fifteenth century were in the region of 12,000-15,000 *salme* while production averaged some 18,000 *salme*.[16]

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[12] V. D'Alessandro, *Politica e società nella Sicilia aragonese* (Palermo: U. Manfredi, 1963); P. Corrao, *Governare un Regno. Potere, società e istituzioni in Sicilia fra Trecento e Quattrocento* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1991).

[13] Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, 96.

[14] D. C. North and R. P. Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World. A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 97-100.

[15] C. Salvo, *Giurati, Feudatari Mercanti. L'élite urbana a Messina tra Medio Evo e Età Moderna* (Rome: Bibliopolis, 1995), 107-8.

[16] A. Petino, *Aspetti e momenti di politica granaria a Catania e in Sicilia nel Quattrocento* (Catania: Università di Catania, 1952), 30.

Moreover, the desire on the part of the state to act in the interests of the urban masses and to implement long-term economic reforms often conflicted with more immediate political and fiscal concerns. An example from Agrigento serves to emphasize this point.[17] In 1404, after the town's *giurati* (municipal officials) had acted to prevent grain exports out of their port, Martin I declared to those officials the monarchy's intention to act in the interests of the island's cities first and the merchants second. That assurance notwithstanding, in 1433 the crown had given permission to two feudal lords to establish their own *caricatori* in the region thereby bypassing that of Agrigento. By then Martin had been succeeded by Alfonso V who intervened directly in the Italian grain markets, selling grain during periods of scarcity and high demand, apparently with great zeal.[18] In the 1430s, while engaged in military campaigns against Naples, Alfonso passed a series of measures promoting grain exports at the expense of domestic consumption requirements. The Aragonese king was at that moment desperately in need of funds and provisions, both of which could be obtained by manipulating sales of grain. Thus, in the course of the fifteenth century, as grain exports increased, Sicily's towns, faced with a growing population and rising grain prices, were increasingly forced into a harsh struggle to gain control over food supplies for their citizens.[19] Some of the larger cities managed to either assure themselves of preferential access to grain stocks through special arrangements or by closing ports or even by interdicting grain destined for export. Smaller communities, such as the Maltese Islands, often faced even greater difficulties.

III

The Maltese islands, consisting of Malta, Gozo and Comino, have a combined area of only about 316 square kilometers. The surface is rocky in most places, the soil is shallow and water generally scarce

[17] V. D'Alessandro, "Paesaggio agrario, regime della terra e società rurale (secoli XI-XV)," in V. D'Alessandro, *Terra, nobili e borghesi nella Sicilia medievale* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1994), 58-60; orig. publ. in R. Romano, ed., *Storia della Sicilia*, 10 vols. (Naples: Società editrice Storia di Napoli e della Sicilia, 1980), 3: 411-47.

[18] Del Treppo, *I mercanti*, 357-9 and Chap. 3.

[19] Bresc, *Un monde*, 744-7.

so that even today agriculture is heavily dependent on winter precipitation. The archipelago was incorporated into the Norman kingdom of Sicily in the late eleventh century and after 1282 became a peripheral outpost of the Crown of Aragon.[20] In spite of the harsh physical environment, Malta (the largest of the three islands) managed to support a sizeable population throughout the late middle ages, probably hovering around 10,000 by the early fifteenth century. The only sizeable concentrations of people on Malta were the town of Mdina with its suburb of Rabat in the center and the royal castle at Birgu, which guarded the island's main harbor located in the south-east. Most other inhabitants were dispersed in rural settlements where they cultivated their own fields or worked on the larger private fiefs or royal estates. Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy and the land was worked by a free peasantry, with wheat, cumin and cotton being the principal crops. Cotton, both raw and in spun form, was widely exported and provided a valuable source of income through which Malta was able to pay for the growing necessity to purchase wheat from nearby Sicily.[21]

Given their geographical proximity, and the fact that they both formed part of the same political order, it was natural for the Maltese to look to Sicily, a mere 60 km away, to supply local needs. Sicilian wheat was of superior quality compared to that grown in Malta and was therefore always in demand. Nonetheless, the need for Malta to import grain was probably not acute prior to the fifteenth century.[22] A number of instances are known in the fourteenth century when Malta actually exported grain to Sicily but even then these were probably unusual occurrences. A more accurate picture

[20] A. T. Luttrell, "Approaches to Medieval Malta," in A. T. Luttrell, ed., *Medieval Malta. Studies on Malta before the Knights* (London: The British School at Rome, 1975), 1-70, repr. in A. T. Luttrell, *The Making of Christian Malta* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2002), remains the best introduction to the island's medieval history. For more recent overviews, C. Dalli, *Iz-Zmien Nofsani Malti* (Malta: Pubblikazzjonijiet Indipendenza, 2002); B. Blouet, *The Story of Malta*, rev. ed. (Malta: Progress Press, 2004).

[21] H. Bresc, "The 'Secrezia' and the Royal Patrimony in Malta: 1240-1450," in Luttrell, *Medieval Malta*, 132. Maltese cotton is mentioned in Genoa in 1164: Abulafia, *The Two Italies*, 218. In the fifteenth century it was extensively utilized in Barcelona and also in Genoa and Montpellier. Del Treppo provides several examples of Catalan merchants purchasing cotton in Malta.

[22] G. Wettinger, "Agriculture in Malta in the Late Middle Ages," in M. Buhagiar, ed., *Proceedings of History Week 1981* (Malta: The Malta Historical Society, 1982), 13.

of Malta's grain requirements is possible for the fifteenth century for which more documentary material has survived.[23] In 1435 the Maltese claimed that grain shortages occurred every two to three years and were reducing the island to "great poverty."[24] The Maltese historian Godfrey Wettinger argues that in this period it became increasingly necessary to supplement local production with regular imports, probably on the order of 1000-2000 *salme* each year.[25] In critical moments the estimated need for grain could be higher still. In 1468, which admittedly may have been an unusually harsh year, the municipal council ordered the purchase of 4,000 *salme*, while in 1480, faced with the threat of a Turkish invasion, the authorities debated whether they should purchase 2,000, 3,000, or 5,000 *salme*.[26] Given that one *salma* was equivalent to the yearly consumption for 1-1.5 individuals, these figures represent significant amounts that must have imposed a considerable financial burden on the island's limited resources. A population list from 1480 for the community of Rabat, possibly drawn up in response to the above-mentioned invasion scare, indicated that its population of 317 households necessitated an additional 896 *salme* of grain.[27] Certainly the need to import grain pressed ever more urgently upon the Maltese authorities between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, as the island experienced a demographic upsurge that doubled the population to almost 20,000 by 1530[28] (at the time of the arrival of the knights

[23] The main sources utilized here are the records of the Maltese municipal administration, in G. Wettinger, ed., *Acta Iuratorum et Consilii Civitatis et Insulae Maltae* (Palermo: Associazione di Studi Malta-Sicilia/Centro di Studi Filologici e Linguistici Siciliani, 1993).

[24] S. Giambruno and L. Genuardi, eds., *Capitoli inediti delle città demaniali di Sicilia approvati sino al 1458*, 1, *Alcamo-Malta* (Palermo: Boccone del povero, 1918), 409: "ki omni dui oy tri anni pati penuria di victuaglu per ki a quista chitati et insola fa misteri trahiri di Sichilia gran quantitati di frumenti."

[25] Wettinger, "Agriculture in Malta," 14.

[26] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 286, § 772.

[27] S. Fiorini, "Li Buki di Rabatu: The Population of Rabat c. 1480," in T. Cortis, T. Freller, L. Bugeja, ed., *Melitensium Amor. Festschrift in honour of Dun Gwann Azzopardi* (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2002), 73-96.

[28] G. Wettinger, "The Militia List of 1419-20: A New Starting Point for the Study of Malta's Population," *Melita Historica* 5 (2) (1969): 80-106; S. Fiorini, "Malta in 1530," in V. Mallia-Milanes, ed., *Hospitaller Malta 1530-1798. Studies on Early Modern Malta and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem* (Malta: Mireva, 1993), 121-6. Comparable demographic growth patterns have been observed for Sicily in the later fifteenth century: M. Aymard, "Une croissance sélective: la population sicilienne aux XVIe-XVIIe siècles," *Mélanges de la Casa de*

of St John). By then, Malta and Gozo were importing about 9,000 *salme* of wheat annually.[29]

As in other towns and cities in Sicily, the task of ensuring that the population were adequately supplied with wheat was the responsibility of the local municipal council or *universitas*.[30] The *universitas* of Malta was based at Mdina but its jurisdiction in fact extended beyond the limits of that town to include all the villages on the island, where a large section of the population lived. In addition to the procurement of grain, the *universitas* oversaw the defense of the island, the farming out of indirect taxes (*gabelle*) on imported and exported goods, and the enforcement of price controls on foodstuffs. The principal officials of the *universitas* were the captain, who was appointed by the royal authorities, and the *jurati*, who were chosen locally and served for one year. Studies on the Maltese *universitas* and other *universitates* in Sicily have demonstrated that they tended to be dominated by a small group of families, who often viewed public office as an opportunity to promote sectional or private interests.[31] From 1402 to 1457, the *universitas* of Malta was effectively controlled by 68 families, of whom only 42 had members who became *jurati*. Moreover, that office was in fact monopolized by fourteen families whose members received 101 of 145 municipal appointments.[32]

The precise extent to which personal interests impinged on the public responsibility of the *universitas* to provision its citizens with grain is difficult to assess. The language used in the debates that took place during council meetings was often vague and the necessary prosopographical research that can identify relations among different families or groups has not yet been done. However, the pro-

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Velasquez (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1968), 4: 303-27.

[29] Wettinger, "Agriculture in Malta," 14.

[30] P. Corrao, "Assemblee municipali nella Sicilia tardomedievale: note sul caso maltese," in P. Xuereb, ed., *Karissime Gotifride. Historical Essays Presented to Professor Godfrey Wettinger on his Seventieth Birthday* (Malta: Malta University Press, 1999), 37-46; Fiorini, "Malta in 1530," 111-98. Roughly 16 per cent of debates and deliberations within the town council between 1450 and 1499 concerned matters relating to grain.

[31] C. Dalli, "Capitoli: The Voice of an Elite," in S. Fiorini, ed., *Proceedings of History Week 1992* (Malta: The Malta Historical Society, 1994), 1-18. For similar patterns of behavior within the *universitas* of Messina, Salvo, *Giurati*, 95-120.

[32] Bresc, *Un monde*, 727.

posals put forward by some council members frequently appear to have specifically favored certain individuals at the expense of others. For instance, in March 1474 a number of merchants protested a decision by the *universitas* that prohibited the sale of grain for eight days with the exception of one merchant who a few days earlier had been allowed to sell a quantity of wheat at the high price of 21 *tarì* per *salma*.[33] In other instances, some *jurati* attempted to manipulate the selling price of imported grain to favor another merchant who was entrusted with its procurement (and who served periodically as a *jurato*). If these examples represent a more widespread pattern of behavior among Maltese municipal authorities at the time they would have certainly represented a further disruption to the flow of trade in grain between the two islands.

When it became necessary to import wheat to Malta, communal officials often appointed a representative charged with its procurement. They also needed to decide how much grain to buy and at what price, and the price at which it would be sold in Malta.[34] The Maltese *universitas*, like other Sicilian towns, had consuls in various parts of Sicily where its merchants traded, including Licata and Syracuse, and these officials most likely functioned as intermediaries between sellers and buyers. Most grain destined for Malta was apparently shipped from Terranova, Licata and Syracuse, all on Sicily's southern coast. At other times, the Maltese authorities were approached directly by individuals or firms willing to bring grain to the island. In that case, the *jurati* discussed the offer and, if found acceptable, gave permission for the deal to take place. Contemporary records indicate the involvement of Maltese and Sicilians in this trade but Catalan merchants were especially prominent. This activity confirms a pattern, already delineated by Mario Del Treppo, whereby Catalans supplied cloth and agricultural products to Malta in

[33] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 556, § 561, § 562. As in Sicily, the money of account used in Malta and Gozo was the *uncia*, *tarì*, *grani* and *denari* (1 *uncia* = 30 *tarì*, 1 *tarì* = 20 *grani*, 1 *grano* = 6 *denari*). The Maltese *uncia* was equivalent to around one-seventh of that of Sicily in the late fifteenth century.

[34] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 219 (1462): council granted Fredericus Calabachi, a fellow *jurat*, "liberam et generalem potestatem administracionem et procuram pro emendo frumentum per universitatem et illud mictendo cum navigiis et si invenerit aliquem qui offeret fornire insolam frumento pro toto anno eciam ad granos duos ultra quod veniret ad expensas universitates quod habeat licenciam concordandi hoc prestito per eum juramento sollempni dum modo quod alii ferentes possent vendere ..."

exchange for Maltese raw and spun cotton.[35] As a territory that formed part of the kingdom of Sicily, commercial relations between Malta and Sicily should have been categorized as internal trade, and hence exempted from payment of licences, known as *tratte*, that were levied on exports of grain *fuori regno*. In practice things worked rather differently.

In fact, one of the most pressing concerns for the Maltese *universitas* in the early fifteenth century was to obtain from the royal officials a permanent exemption from payment of the *tratte* and other taxes on trade. This aim appeared to have been realized in 1398, when shortly after the restoration of Aragonese power in Sicily, Martin I exempted from export duties all commerce *intra regno* involving grain and foodstuffs traded by sea. That privilege was hitherto enjoyed only by the city of Messina but was now extended throughout the demesne which included most *universitates*, among them that of Malta.[36] In 1416 however, the Maltese petitioned Ferdinand I to reconfirm that privilege, alleging that they were being taxed at one-half *tratta* for each *salma*.[37] It has been argued that Martin's decree contributed to the formation of an integrated grain market in Sicily by opening the way for reduced incidences of shortages and more stable prices.[38] As the example of Malta demonstrates, however, royal privileges could lose much of their effect if they fell into disuse (as the Maltese claimed) or were not reconfirmed or firmly enforced. It is not known whether Ferdinand acceded to the Maltese request, but any trade privileges granted would have been lost from 1421 to 1428, when Malta and Gozo were pawned to the Aragonese nobleman Gonsalvo Monroy and so were not part of the demesne.[39] Alfonso granted another exemption from payment of export licenses on grain and other victuals in 1432, following the reincorporation of the islands into the demesne, yet other requests to reconfirm this privilege recur in 1435 and 1450.[40]

[35] Del Treppo, *I mercanti*, 166-7, 172, 174-5. The exchange of Catalan cloth and foodstuffs for Maltese grain by a Catalan merchant company in the 1450s and 1460s is difficult to explain: Del Treppo, *I mercanti*, 176.

[36] Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, 141.

[37] Giambruno and Genuardi, *Capitoli*, 376.

[38] Epstein, *An Island for Itself*, 141-50.

[39] G. Wettinger, "The Pawning of Malta to Monroy," *Melita Historica* 7 (3) (1978): 265-83.

[40] Giambruno and Genuardi, *Capitoli*, 390.

Even when trading privileges were in force, the Maltese continued to experience difficulties procuring grain, either because of the intransigence or corruption of port officials who refused to honor toll exemptions or because towns in Sicily were unwilling to allow sales of grain for fear that they themselves might experience shortages.[41] Small towns or isolated communities may have been especially vulnerable because they could not easily make their voice heard, which perhaps explains why the *capitoli* (petitions) of the *universitas* of the island of Lipari contained complaints similar to those by the Maltese.[42] In 1483, in spite of an order from the viceroy, the authorities in Licata refused to sell wheat to Malta, and in 1507 Maltese who wished to buy grain from Terranova were allegedly being forced to pay bribes to customs officials or risk imprisonment.[43] Similar protests were made in 1513 and 1515 against other port authorities.[44] Times of scarcity only compounded the usual difficulties. In 1483 the port official of Licata asked the Maltese authorities not to buy all their grain from his city but to extend their search to other ports, particularly during the summer months when the weather was favorable to longer voyages.[45] In fact by 1515, Malta appears to have been buying grain from several *caricatori* including Agrigento, Sciacca, Mazara, Licata, and Heraclea.[46] In difficult circumstances the *universitas* sometimes adopted harsh measures such as requiring those who held stocks of grain to sell it immediately,[47] to conduct searches to reveal hoarded supplies,[48] or to institute forced loans upon all or some members of the community with which the *universi-*

[41] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 517.

[42] Giambruno and Genuardi, *Capitoli*, 366-7, 371.

[43] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 927; J. Del Amo García, S. Fiorini, and G. Wettinger, ed., *Documents of the Maltese Universitas. No. 1. Cathedral Museum, Mdina. Archivum Cathedralis Melitae, Miscellanea 33, 1405-1524*. Documentary Sources of Maltese History (Malta: Malta University Press, 2001), § 84.

[44] Del Amo García, Fiorini, and Wettinger, *Documents*, § 96, § 101.

[45] Del Amo García, Fiorini, and Wettinger, *Documents*, § 45.

[46] Del Amo García, Fiorini, and Wettinger, *Documents*, § 101.

[47] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 73 (1456); §215 (1462); §279 (1468).

[48] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 125 (1461); § 216 (1462). On the *cherca*, Bresc, *Un monde*, 745. Some people made their own private arrangements to purchase grain in Sicily. Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 314 (1468): "si faza la cherca di quilli ki hannu portatu frumentu et si l'annu portatu per usu so si pigla parti per vindiri a lu populu."

tas could purchase grain (*inpronti*).[49] If the situation was deemed to be especially critical, the *universitas* authorized the seizure of ships carrying grain to other destinations and confiscated their cargo.[50]

IV

In conclusion, I would like to remark on two implications which can be derived from this study. First, it is admittedly notoriously difficult, but nonetheless important, to assess the effect of commercialization on a local level. I suggest that the extent to which urban demand in the late Middle Ages was responsible for opening commodity markets and lowering the costs of trade was in part limited by conflicts of interests within and among individual towns. Even in a relatively commercialized society like late medieval Sicily, towns and urban elites were often more concerned with protecting their particular fiscal and commercial privileges than in reducing the cost of regional trade. As John Hatcher and Mark Bailey have recently noted:

> legal controls over trade in the Middle Ages were not intended to secure cheap and ready participation for as many as possible. Rather their object was to extend and protect the control of commercial activity ... for the profit of a few beneficiaries, and this inevitably restricted the scale of any reduction in the transaction costs of marketing for most producers.[51]

Second, I believe that the evidence presented above confirms the view that economic intervention by the medieval state generally came in spurts and its effect was, at best, unevenly distributed. When state-granted economic privileges were reasonably respected or enforced, they may have indeed contributed to a reduction of institutional constraints on trade and promoted regional specialization and greater market integration. However, the Maltese evidence shows that there were also several instances where, in practice, this did not occur. Malta's alienation from the demesne between 1421 and 1428—by no means a unique event among demesnal cities in the

[49] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 25 (undated); §197 (1462); §218 (1462) (forced loan of 1000 florins on "persuni facultusi").

[50] Wettinger, *Acta Iuratorum*, § 547; § 548; § 549.

[51] Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, 168.

kingdom of Sicily—stands as a reminder that, for the state, the benefits of short term gains might outweigh long-term expectations.