

Program Details, IAS Sponsored Session, RSA 2018

Title: Beyond Scylla and Charybdis: Exchanges Between Early Modern Sicily, Spain, and North Africa, I and II

Organizers: Cristelle Baskins (Tufts University) and Elizabeth Kassler-Taub (Case Western Reserve University)

Abstract:

This set of panels responds to a rising interest in the Italian South and its remarkable geographical and cultural reach in the early modern period. The limited scholarship on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Sicily focuses on the island's split identity, its connections to both Spain and Italy. We propose to complicate this scheme by looking to links with North Africa -- a region that, as Braudel argued, our "imperfect knowledge" has "left without a name." Ranging from discussions of the trafficking of African slaves in Palermo to the trans-Mediterranean trade in artistic materials, and the exchange of architectural models on the front lines of war, these interdisciplinary contributions will consider contact between Sicily, the Ottoman world, and North Africa at the height of the early modern period.

Panel I: Thu, March 22, 9:00 to 10:30am, The Chicory, The Gallery

Chair: Daniel Hershenzon (University of Connecticut)

- Alessandro Vanoli (Independent Scholar), "Hercules in Sicily: The Mediterranean Past in Fifteenth-Century African and Spanish Sources."
- Lori di Lucia (University of California, Los Angeles), "Between Sainthood and Slavery: Early Modern Palermo and the Mediterranean-Saharan Slave Trades."
- Lamia Balafrej (University of California, Los Angeles), "Sugar and Marble: The Labor of Diplomatic Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean."

Panel II: Thu, March 22, 11:00am to 12:30pm, The Chicory, The Gallery

Chair: Borja Franco (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia)

- Elizabeth Kassler-Taub (Case Western Reserve University), "Architectural Traffic Between Sicily and North Africa."
- Antonio Urquizar (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), "Early Modern Spanish Descriptions of North African Architecture."
- Cristelle Baskins (Tufts University), "The King of Tunis in Black and White."

Respondent: Avinoam Shalem (Columbia University)

Paper Abstracts:

Panel 1:

"Hercules in Sicily: The Mediterranean Past in Fifteenth-Century African and Spanish Sources."

Alessandro Vanoli, Independent Scholar

The paper intends to analyze reconstructions of the past and political strategies found throughout the late fifteenth-century Mediterranean. From Spanish political use of classical mythology to the idea of the Mediterranean past conveyed by Arabic chronicles and geographic texts, it is possible

to highlight a number of common elements: characters and figures, mostly from ancient Greece and Rome, whose new presence reveals a complex circulation of ideas and cultural elements.

“Between Sainthood and Slavery: Early Modern Palermo and the Mediterranean-Saharan Slave Trades.”

Lori De Lucia, University of California, Los Angeles

The study of early modern Mediterranean slave trades situates Sicily as a crossroads between West Africa and Europe. In Palermo, an important port city connected to both the Iberian Peninsula and trans-Saharan trade routes, West Africans fought in the military, were baptized in Catholic churches, lived as freemen and even achieved sainthood. In my presentation, I will move between the exceptional example of an African beatified in sixteenth century Sicily and the less well-documented cases of the thousands of enslaved Africans living in Palermo, to explore how West Africans helped shape the early modern landscape of this port city. Ultimately, the trans-Saharan routes that both examples shared will encourage a reconsideration of the edges of the Mediterranean, transforming Saharan borders to passageways.

“Sugar and Marble: Labor and Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean.”

Lamia Balafrej, University of California, Los Angeles (beginning January 2018)

This paper is about the interconnectedness of trade, cultural exchange, and labor in the early modern Mediterranean. I seek to bring together two realms of experience that are usually kept apart in the study of the cross-cultural: the circulation and consumption of luxury products such as sugar and marble on the one hand, and the labor systems that produced these goods on the other. The Saadian monarch Ahmad al-Mansur (r. 1578-1603) is known to have used materials from Europe, including Italian marble, to construct the Badi‘ palace. Yet this desire for cosmopolitanism has been treated separately from the political economy that enabled it. As a Moroccan chronicler later reported, marble was likely purchased in exchange for sugar produced by slaves in the South of Morocco. This paper deconstructs the notion of the “Saadian Renaissance” by examining the link between human exploitation and cultural capital in Morocco and the Mediterranean.

Panel II:

“Architectural Traffic Between Sicily and North Africa.”

Elizabeth Kassler-Taub, Case Western Reserve University

This paper examines the exchange of defensive models and building technologies between Sicily and Spanish outposts along the coastline of North Africa with a focus on Goletta, fronting the Bay of Tunis. From 1535 until 1574, the defensive system of Goletta was modernized by a succession of itinerant Italian and Spanish engineers dispatched to North Africa by the Spanish crown. I argue that the Spanish refortification of Goletta reveals substantive exchanges with construction efforts on Sicily, where the same circle of engineers was simultaneously fortifying cities such as the viceregal capital of Palermo. Moreover, engineers active in Goletta directly grappled with a fortress and landscape interventions surviving from the Ottoman period. By questioning how this architectural legacy was assimilated into the form of *Goletta nuova*, I offer an expanded vision of the Iberian-Sicilian encounter with the Ottoman presence in the central Mediterranean.

“Early Modern Spanish Descriptions of North African Architecture.”

Antonio Urquizar, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Early Modern Spanish travellers found both Islamic architecture and Roman antiquities in their visits to the lands of North Africa. While historical writing in Spain had frequently developed a close link between these two poles, the descriptions of North Africa did not continue this approach. What were the expectations of the authors? What links with the Peninsula did they find?

“The King of Tunis in Black and White.”

Cristelle Baskins, Tufts University

Like some of his sons, grandsons, and nephews, Muley Hassan, the Hafsid ruler of Tunis, (r. 1526-1550), was a Habsburg vassal who spent time in viceregal Palermo and Naples, as well as papal Rome. After his death, the exiled king enjoyed a posthumous afterlife in Europe through the medium of illustrated books published into the early eighteenth century. Print portraits of the king depend either on a woodcut broadsheet by Silvester van Parijs (Antwerp, 1535) -- on the model of Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen -- or they take inspiration from an anonymous panel now in the collections at Versailles (ca. 1545). This paper will compare visual images of Muley Hassan to the texts that accompany them. These portraits conveyed to readers and viewers not only the king's elevated status but also his tainted reputation and political stigma.