

The Impact and Legacy of Braudel's Méditerranée in Medieval Italian History

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Before I had ever read Braudel, I was already drawn to works of history that begin by taking you to a place by describing the land, with its particular mountains and plains, and the waters that divide, connect, and nourish it. A good example is David Herlihy's *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200–1430*, published in 1967.¹ Its opening chapter traces the formation of the city's medieval territory, immediately discussing the plain of the middle Arno, the Ombrone river, and the high Apennine “spurs” of Monte della Calvana and the Monte Morello that rose north and northwest of Pistoia.² Such histories drew me into the field, taking me places I never imagined I could be. Even after encountering Braudel's *Méditerranée* in one of those graduate methodology seminars that introduce the novice historian to the many ways in which histories have been crafted and conceived, I didn't connect his *Méditerranée* with the kind of history I wanted to write. This is, I think, because medieval historians, especially those with whom I am most familiar who study Italy, had adopted only a sort of weak Braudelianism. This influence had two components.

First, historians of medieval Italy agreed that the Mediterranean's physical environment was very important, but they didn't give it the causal weight and narrative dominance characteristic of Braudel's *Méditerranée*. They tended, for example, to begin with the landscape, acknowledge its power, but then focus on all the canny ways people made their livelihood, and made meaning, in the awesome theater of its power. Put another way, empowering the natural environment (as Braudel, to his great credit, did) and minimizing the role of elite politics (as he also rightly did), opened up space for histories of other people and their struggles. The physical environment was there, right up front, but it wasn't the point; the people and their struggles were.

¹ David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200–1430* (Yale University Press, 1967).

² Herlihy, *Pistoia*, 1–14.

Second, many medieval historians adapted the *structures* emphasized by Braudel and the Annalists into an analytical narrative form that was “bottom up.” After sketching the physical environment, the historian layered analyses of the structures emerging from it, such as the economy, the society, and its governing institutions. These moved at different paces, the deeper ones at slower gaits (although rarely quite so glacially as Braudel’s *Méditerranée*).

Partly, this adoption of what I am calling a weak Braudelism may have been due to the different way Braudel’s great work was received by medievalists. Braudel’s focus on the great inland sea was not, perhaps, as striking to medievalists as it was to his primary audience of historians of early modern Europe. After all, we medievalists had been to the Mediterranean before. Henri Pirenne’s *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (published in 1937) had already posited the Mediterranean as the very starting point of medieval history.³ The Pirenne debate—over whether the expansion of Islam in the seventh century was the catastrophic rupture that marked the beginning of the Middle Ages rather than the collapse of the western Roman state two centuries earlier—was even acknowledged by Braudel as an inspiration for his *magnum opus*. When pressed to explain his choice of the Mediterranean as his topic, he recalled hearing a series of “marvelous lectures” by Pirenne in 1931 at Algiers about the Belgian historian’s “ideas on the closure of the Mediterranean after the Moslem invasions.”⁴

Nonetheless, Braudel’s broader emphasis on geography, landscape, the environment, agriculture, livestock grazing, transportation, towns, and demography did have a significant impact on medieval history by valorizing work on these topics. This is certainly evident in my late mentor David Herlihy’s career, as he moved from Bryn Mawr College, to the University of Wisconsin–Madison, to Harvard University (and finally to Brown). This impact on the history of medieval Italy, however, was far more evident in the United States than in Italy. Although there are lots of reasons Herlihy partnered with Christiane Klapisch-Zuber to undertake their massive computer-assisted analysis of the 1427 Florentine catasto (or census record), one was that very few Italian historians of the Middle Ages in the late 1960s and early 1970s were at all interested in demography and the history of the family, much less in computers.⁵ The greatest impact in Italy of Braudel and the *Annales* School has generally been through the *École française de Rome*.

Installed in 1875 in the beautiful Farnese palace in the heart of Rome, this research institute’s multiyear fellowships for doctoral candidates and early career historians working on medieval Italy brought the *Annales* revolution to Italy, particularly through its publication of the mammoth regional histories of scholars such as Pierre Toubert on Lazio (1973),⁶ Henri Bresc on Sicily (1986),⁷ Jean-Marie Martin on Puglia (1993),⁸ and in the same year (1993) François Menant⁹ on the Lombard countryside (between Bergamo, Cremona, and Brescia from the tenth to thirteenth

³ Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Félix Alcan Nouvelle Société d’Éditions, 1937).

⁴ Fernand Braudel, “Personal Testimony,” *The Journal of Modern History* 44, no. 4 (1972): 452.

⁵ David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles: Une étude du catasto florentin de 1427* (Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1978).

⁶ Pierre Toubert, *Les structures du Latium méridional et la Sabine du IX^e siècle à la fin du XII^e siècle* (École française de Rome, 1973).

⁷ Henri Bresc, *Un monde méditerranéen: Économie et société en Sicile, 1300–1450* (École française de Rome, 1986).

⁸ Jean-Marie Martin, *La Pouille du VI^e au XII^e siècle* (École française de Rome, 1993).

⁹ François Menant, *Campagnes lombardes du moyen âge: L’économie et la société rurales dans la région de Bergame, de Crémone et de Brescia du X^e au XII^e siècle* (École française de Rome, 1993).

century), Laurent Feller on the Abruzzo (1998),¹⁰ and Amedeo Feniello on the Neapolitan countryside in the late Middle Ages (2005).¹¹ After the classic, and supremely valuable, *thèse d'Etat* survey of the sources, these works give extensive consideration of the natural setting (geography, hydrology, soils, vegetation, systems of agriculture) before reconstructing and analyzing the economic, social, religious, judicial, and political structures. Not all of these works have garnered equal attention from Italian medieval historians, but Toubert's thesis on *incastellamento*—a massive transformation of settlement patterns over the tenth through twelfth centuries—drove debate and research by Italian scholars from the mid-1990s, with articles appearing on the topic in Italian into this decade. Toubert's work had a huge impact on Italian research on medieval history, and the French school in Rome remains the most vibrant and ambitious force for innovative history on the Italian Middle Ages.

So, from my perspective, institutions matter even more than geography when it comes to changes in the writing of history. One wouldn't know this from the *Méditerranée*, but it is evident from Braudel's long tenures as director of the Centre de recherches historiques (beginning in 1949), of the Sixième section of the École pratique des hautes études (1956–1972), and of the *Annales* (1946–1985). Long may the two humanities centers that hosted this celebration of Braudel's work—the Stanford Humanities Center at Stanford University and the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California–Berkeley—endure in their support of innovative history and historians. A

¹⁰ Laurent Feller, *Les Abruzzes médiévales: Territoire, économie et société en Italie centrale du IX^e au XII^e siècle* (École française de Rome, 1998).

¹¹ Amadeo Feniello, *Les campagnes napolitaines à la fin du Moyen Âge: Mutations d'un paysage rural* (École française de Rome, 2005).