

Braudel, Philip II, and Sicily

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As one of those rare works that almost singlehandedly created an entire new historical field, Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* is a text that continues to inspire. Journals, conferences, books, and the establishment of new tenure-track positions in Mediterranean studies all testify to Braudel's enormous and lasting influence.¹

This is not to say that the field in 2025 neatly corresponds to Braudel's vision. Most noticeably, the chronological, geographical, and thematic ranges of topics have expanded considerably, and the second part of Braudel's title, "in the Age of Philip II," no longer describes the chronological or political focus of more than a small fraction of the scholarship on the Mediterranean World. Indeed, some scholars, such as those of the self-described "California school," question the usefulness of traditional political categories of analysis. Instead they have "promoted the Mediterranean not (*pace* Braudel) as a predefined place of the olive and vine [or of Philip II], but as a heuristic rubric useful for disrupting or reconfiguring existing categories of analysis (especially those defined by nation-states, continents, or religious cultures)."²

This short intervention challenges that view and suggests that the future of Mediterranean history still has much to gain by recognizing and embracing the fundamental importance of the political history of the "Age of Philip II" and the Spanish empire more generally in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Braudel's work, it is critical to remember, began as a political history rooted in the Spanish archives. The 1929 thesis that was the genesis of the later 1947 *thèse d'état* focused on the foreign policy of Philip II, 1557–98, and it corresponds closely to the last section of volume two (pp. 967–1142) of the 1979 edition with the subtitle of "Philip II and Spanish political

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (Harper & Row, 1972), 2:993.

² Quote taken from the program announcement of The Mediterranean Seminar Fall 2023 workshop at the University of California-Santa Cruz on the theme of "Mediterranean Studies, Present and Future." Brackets are mine.

policy in the Mediterranean from 1559 to 1574.” With its emphasis on the Spanish and Ottoman military contest in those critical decades, including a very long treatment of the battle of Lepanto, that section is a brilliant example of a lively political/military history narrative that underlined the importance of the Spanish monarchy in checking Ottoman expansion westward in the latter half of the sixteenth century. More generally, the political analysis in the later pages underlines the central role that Spain under Philip II played in shaping the history of Italy, Sicily, Malta, the Aeolian islands, other islands in the western Mediterranean, and the Spanish coastline.

As one of the first works to emphasize the importance of Spain and Philip II in shaping the Mediterranean, Braudel’s book opened up substantial new horizons for historians. But the breadth of his work and historical vision defied easy or frequent imitation. Moreover, the general challenge of successfully executing an *Annales*-style study of Mediterranean cities, islands, economies, or major social transformations has more often than not resulted in shorter scholarly interventions as opposed to macro histories that aspire to embrace the *histoire totale* that Braudel dared to pursue.

In the final paragraphs of this short essay, I would like to suggest an example of a large Braudelian theme that honors his vision of the Mediterranean. This is the history of Spanish Sicily in the long sixteenth century, a subject pointed to in his work to one extent or another but never fully developed.

Sicily had a substantial presence in Braudel’s work and in his view of the Mediterranean. The island played a critical role in the Spanish and Ottoman political contest, and it is in this realm that Braudel gives Sicily the most attention. From the beginning of Philip II’s reign, the king had to face the constant threat of attacks on the island and nearby territories by the Ottomans and their surrogates in Tunisia. The Siege of Malta in 1565 was the most serious threat to Spanish control of the central Mediterranean, and it was a force of Spanish soldiers from Sicily that successfully lifted the siege and delivered a heavy blow to the Ottoman navy. In 1571 the Holy League of papal, Venetian, and Spanish ships that defeated the Ottomans at Lepanto sailed from Messina, where many of the ships were provisioned, again underlining the central role that Sicily played in the Spanish imperial system in Italy.

Braudel provides excellent detail on these major events, but this is really just a beginning in understanding how Spanish military policies reshaped Sicily in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A full-scale history of the island in the Spanish period will require a more extensive analysis of the expansion of fortresses around the island, the funding and maintenance of the Spanish army and navy in Sicily, and the role that the Sicilian forces played in the broader Mediterranean policies and military activities of the Spanish monarchy. Philip II had an extensive and detailed political agenda for the island that did not end with Lepanto, and his Sicilian policies deserve an expansive section in a history of Spanish Sicily.³

Similarly, while Braudel mentions some of the major Spanish viceroys and their role in the political history of Sicily, a full-scale study of the island will require a much more comprehensive political analysis rooted in the thick archival sources available. The *Estado Sicilia* section in the

³ A few samples of useful historical literature on early modern Sicily and the Spanish theme include: Francesco Benigno, *L’isola dei vicerè: Potere e conflitto nella Sicilia spagnola (sec. XVI–XVIII)* (University of Palermo Press, 2017); Francesco Benigno, “Integration and Conflict in Spanish Sicily,” in *Spain in Italy: Politics, Religion and Society*, ed. Thomas Dandeleit and John Marino (Brill, 2006); Giuseppe Bonaffini, *La Sicilia e i Barbereschi: Incursioni corsare e riscatto degli schiavi (1570–1606)* (ILA Palma, 1983); and Helmut Koenigsberger, *The Practice of Empire* (Cornell University Press, 1969).

archives at Simancas, most importantly, contains roughly 100 volumes of correspondence from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries between the Spanish monarchs and their Sicilian vice-roys, inquisitors, nobility, bishops, and others that have never been systematically exploited and incorporated into a political history of early modern Sicily.

Similarly, these sources also provide substantial materials for a social history of the island under Spanish rule. Spanish immigration to the island transformed Sicilian society to an extent that has gone largely unstudied and unacknowledged. Tens of thousands of Spanish soldiers, merchants, churchmen, lawyers, noblemen, and their families and followers settled on the island, frequently intermarried with the native population, and spent large sums of money on palaces, churches, convents and monasteries, hospitals, charities, and other enterprises. Cities like Palermo expanded greatly in the sixteenth century. Palermo, in particular, grew from roughly 30,000 at the beginning of the century to 100,000 by 1600. Again, Philip II played a central role in encouraging Spanish settlement in Sicily, and the decades of his rule witnessed an overt program of Hispanization represented, for example, by the appointment of Spaniards to most of the major bishoprics of the island.

Another essential theme, the economy of the island, also needs additional research that incorporates the influx of money from Spain. The existing work on taxation, agricultural production, and noble and church income leaves the economic picture limited at best. Spanish bishops, viceroys, merchants, inquisitors, and lawyers added a great deal to the economy, a fact that has yet to be studied or quantified as part of a much larger imperial economy.

Finally, a new history of Spanish Sicily will need sections on cultural production and religion, areas that Braudel largely left to the side but that played a major role in shaping Spanish Sicily. Hundreds of new churches, convents, bishop's palaces, and monasteries were built in Palermo, Catania, Cefalù, Siracusa, Noto, and Messina under the Spanish. Parallel to this, the Sicilian nobility built and decorated new palaces all around the island. In part, this was a peace dividend brought about by a serious reduction of major threats to the island's people and property under Spanish rule. While the Ottoman pirates never completely disappeared, they no longer posed a serious threat to the cities or major noble estates that flourished in the age of Philip II and beyond.

This was the Sicily of Philip II and the other Spanish monarchs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was a distinct period in the island's history when it was truly at the center of the Mediterranean World, and it still awaits a well-deserved, full-scale history that follows the spirit, if not the exact letter, of Braudel. A