



MIGRATION IN THE MEDIEVAL MEDITERRANEAN

Sarah Davis-Secord

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Introduction

Humans have been on the move for as long as they have been human. From the earliest migrations of *homo sapiens* out of Africa, to the influx of Germanic tribes and Eurasian steppe peoples who crossed the borders of the Roman Empire from the fourth century CE, all the way to the millions of refugees from Africa and the Middle East seeking entry into the European Union today, repeated waves of multidirectional migration have impacted political, cultural, linguistic, economic, and environmental landscapes for millennia. Indeed, large-scale migration has been one of the most influential factors shaping human history, and it shows no signs of stopping. And this fact is especially true when considering the history of the Mediterranean Sea. Just as today the Mediterranean Sea is a conduit for refugees and migrants, so too in the Middle Ages was it the field across which large numbers of people travelled for pilgrimage, politics, or profit, relocated or were relocated against their will, and sought refuge, safety, and gain.

Modern science has confirmed the depth of migration's impact through DNA analysis—of both modern populations and ancient ones. Study of “aDNA” (ancient DNA) is a growing field within archaeology and history. For example, a series of broad-based genetic studies have shown that all modern human populations contain strains of genetic material from wide varieties of different ancient locations; relatedly, they have found that no population's genetic material indicates

long-term stability or ethnic purity. In fact, outside of Indigenous Australians, all modern human populations are the genetic result of waves of migration and mixing: that is, historically speaking, migration—not population stability—has been the norm. In other words, the long history of population movements on both large and small scales means that there are no “pure” races or ethnicities.¹

And while the movement of human populations has an ancient pedigree, it is also the case that from the very earliest phase of human settlement during the Neolithic period, there has been conflict between settled communities and migratory peoples. One of the earliest surviving written stories, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a poem from ancient Mesopotamia, records the fear with which city-dwellers faced the “wild man” of nomadic cultures. Likewise, many modern media representations of refugees and migrants into European and American spaces highlight the fears and concerns that their arrival might inspire; such fear often leads to opposition to immigration. Modern migration patterns see millions of people fleeing war, genocide, famine, and poverty in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East coursing into the European Union and the United States, only to there be faced with racist hostility, bureaucratic obstructions, difficulty finding gainful employment, and continuing poverty.

None of this is to say that directionalities, patterns, or volumes of migration have been constant across the millennia, or that historical numbers of long-distance migrants are comparable to modern ones. There is no way to quantify premodern migrants, unlike contemporary ones who are being tracked by both governmental and non-governmental agencies. For instance, the UNHCR, a division of the UN tasked with protecting refugees, keeps precise and up-to-date counts of the people attempting to cross the Mediterranean into Europe via different points of entry.² Premodern migra-

1 <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/05/theres-no-such-thing-pure-european-or-anyone-else>.

2 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

tions certainly did not include as many known individuals, but that fact does not make them less historically significant. And we know that the pace and volume of migration has intensified at various times in history. Some periods have featured massive population movements, while others have seen only a trickle.

The European Middle Ages (roughly 500–1500 CE) was a time of considerable movement and migration, despite the stereotyped image of the period as static, locally-bound, and ignorant of the wider world. For some historians, in fact, the medieval period began at the moment in which Germanic tribal groups moved into the Roman Empire and fundamentally changed it: these large-scale migrations resulted in the establishment of new political communities within Europe that would come to be understood as the foundation of modern political states. Similarly, in some ways of thinking, the “Middle Ages” ended because Turkish groups who had migrated westward from steppe regions conquered the Byzantine capital of Constantinople in 1453. In this one sense, then, migration may define the very boundaries of the Middle Ages as a period of study.

Just like the millions of modern refugees who cross the Mediterranean in small boats and rafts destined for Greece and southern Italy, seeking a better life within the borders of Europe, many medieval migrants relocated within and across the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean has long been an arena for the movements of peoples, goods, ideas, and pathogens. Before the Roman Empire made the inland sea their own (calling it *mare nostrum*, or “our sea”) by conquering all of the surrounding land territories, both Phoenicians and Greeks sailed long distances across the Mediterranean and founded colonies far from their motherlands. Both groups originated in the eastern Mediterranean region but sent out waves of ships filled with trade goods and people who settled regions across both northern and southern shores of the western Mediterranean. From the mid-third century BCE, the Romans began to conquer those settlements along with many others populated by various peoples.

As the Roman republic transformed into an empire, the entire Mediterranean world came under Rome's political and economic control, encompassing a wide variety of languages, religions, and ethnicities. Even at its earliest stages, the ancient community of Romans traced their ancestry back to migrants from the eastern Mediterranean: one story they told themselves about the foundation of their city involved a refugee who fled from his destroyed city in the Near East, bringing with him only his father, his son, a few friends, and his family gods. Aeneas' trip across the Mediterranean in order to establish the city of Rome was, in fact, quite similar to those of many medieval and modern migrants: marked by the deaths of beloved family members, disastrous shipwrecks, uncertainty about where they would end up, and fears about how they would manage life in a new land.

As the Roman Empire broke up into the various medieval states and communities that constituted early medieval Byzantium, the Islamicate world, and the petty states of Latin Europe, this tradition of human mobility was transformed but not halted. Some of the most defining events of the late antique and early medieval periods, in fact, were large scale migration events and population movements. The massive influxes of Germanic, Slavic, and other peoples into the Roman Empire (formerly called the "barbarian migrations") between the late fourth to seventh centuries are often credited with sparking the end of the empire's existence as a united whole (although that interpretation continues to be debated by historians). Likewise, the movements of Muslims—primarily ethnically Arab, Bedouin, and Amazigh (Berber)—into the Mediterranean Sea region were fundamentally transformative for the post-Roman eastern hemisphere. And, outside of these broad demographic alterations, which brought thousands of new settlers, rulers, and other migrants into the lands of Europe, North Africa, and the Levant, individuals moved homes for a wide variety of reasons across the Middle Ages. Some relocated temporarily, others permanently. Some moved by choice—seeking profitable employ-

ment, marriage, or a safer place to live—and others against their will, as enslaved people, exiles, or refugees.

This book profiles a number of such medieval migrants, providing a peek into their lives, their motivations for migration, and the struggles they faced in new lands. Just like in the contemporary world, the vast majority of medieval asylum-seekers and refugees leave little or no trace in the historical records, meaning that their life stories are difficult or impossible to recover. But unlike in the modern world, where video and photography capture the devastation on the faces of crowds of refugees or the tragic sights of hundreds of migrants drowning during shipwrecks, for most of the medieval period even the very existence of migrants and asylum-seekers can seem undetectable. This book seeks to recover glimpses of just a few of these migrants' lives and to propose that we can use their stories as the basis for a broader understanding of the patterns and motivations for migration across the medieval Mediterranean. I do not argue that medieval migration and modern migration are exactly the same but, in accord with the goals of this *Past Imperfect* series to inspire new ways of thinking about the past, I want to draw attention to the migration experiences of medieval people.

In fact, one of the notable conclusions that I hope you will draw from reading the short biographies of these medieval migrants is the similarity of their motivations to those of today's migrants. The decision to leave one's home and travel into the unknown is not easily taken, neither today nor in the past, and typically only results from dire circumstances. Regime change, religious or political oppression, and the hope of finding a more successful and profitable life rank at the top of these motivations for medieval people. Others moved against their will—as enslaved individuals or as communities relocated or expelled by kings. Not discussed in this book are the many medieval travellers who relocated temporarily for reasons of business, diplomacy, or pilgrimage—this book is not about travel broadly, but about people who sought new lives in new lands as do today's immigrants and refugees. One key take-away that I hope you will get from

these stories is the common humanity shared by medieval people and modern people. We may not know as much about their lives, but medieval migrants were *humans* who sought better circumstances for themselves and their families—just as modern migrants do.

A few caveats must be kept in mind as we progress through these migrants' mini-biographies. Most obviously, the majority of stories that I have been able to locate are representative of elite migrants and those whose journeys ended in successful adaptation to new circumstances. Very seldom do we find information about poor or otherwise disadvantaged people who sought refuge in new places, or those who died in the midst of their migration. This might be because migration opportunities typically only presented themselves to those with the means to pay for them and to set up a new life in a foreign place. Or, it might be the result of our primary source texts which, as a general rule for the medieval period, favour the social elite. In many cases (although not all of them), I think that we can safely extrapolate from an individual elite migrant to the broader circumstances that may have similarly motivated masses of lower-status refugees, although whether they would have been able to pay for travel and the establishment of new homes is a different and much more difficult question.

A second difficulty that will soon become obvious is that the majority of the migrants profiled here are men. This factor surely arises both from the biases of our sources and also from the fact that medieval women rarely would have migrated alone, without the protection and assistance of their families. But the reverse is also true: most men did not migrate alone, but were accompanied by mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. In many of our migrants' stories, the focus is on the famous man but we also can glimpse the family members who moved with him. We must work a little harder, then, to witness the experiences of women migrants and refugees—to find their burial sites, archaeological remains, and the hints of their stories that lay beneath those of the men who often take centre stage. We may never

be able to recover all of the unique ways in which migration affected women and children, but we must always remember that they existed.

This book argues two main points: one, that by viewing the medieval period through the lens of long-distance migration, we can better understand the commonalities connecting medieval and modern people. And in doing so, we can see greater commonality between the two periods than we might expect. Both medieval and modern eras have seen refugees seeking safer and better lives in new places, often for strikingly similar reasons. It is my hope that this work will help us to think anew about the long history of human migration, drawing closer together our perspectives on modern migrants and medieval ones. While the political conditions of the contemporary world and those of the Middle Ages are radically different—with distinct perspectives on the nature of borders, nationhood, place, and identity—nonetheless, we see human struggles and motivations for migration that share some common themes across the centuries.

A second perspective that this book seeks to advance is that patterns of migration, and the stories of individual migrants, can be an entry point for thinking about medieval Mediterranean history as a whole. Mediterranean studies has been a vibrant and growing field in recent decades, in large part because of the appeal of studying a place with no fixed boundaries, national identity, common language or religion, nor a monolithic culture or economy. But despite this attention, debate continues over what exactly the medieval Mediterranean *was*—one place or many, united by frequent and easy overseas communication or divided by religion and culture? One of the foundational historians of the Mediterranean, Fernand Braudel, writing in the mid-twentieth century, argued for a long continuity of stable structures across expanses of space and time. On the other hand, the early twentieth-century medievalist Henri Pirenne emphasized discontinuity: he argued for a decisive break between a unified Roman Mediterranean and a fractured one of the early medieval period; he located that division along a Muslim-Christian

religio-cultural border. Both Braudel's and Pirenne's theories have been intensively debated ever since.

Early in the twenty-first century, three big books offered new approaches to the earlier paradigms. A challenge to Braudel came in *The Corrupting Sea* by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell. They argued that, rather than continuity based on shared geography and environment, it was in fact regional diversity (among what they call "micro-ecologies") that fuelled connections across the sea. People mitigated risk of food insecurity and managed their material needs through exchanges with people living in different environments. Because sailing around the Mediterranean was relatively easy and smooth, they argued, it was an ideal arena for frequent, small-scale connections. Michael McCormick's *Origins of the European Economy*, on the other hand, sought to answer Pirenne: it presented evidence of much greater travel and exchange than Pirenne allowed—especially between Christian and Islamic domains—using discrete anecdotes about cross-Mediterranean movements of people or items. Individual acts of travel or exchange, considered independently, may prove little, but in the aggregate they can show underlying patterns of movement, connection, and commerce. Stepping back from such systemic or structural approaches, David Abulafia, in his *The Great Sea*, emphasized the human plane of the Mediterranean Sea. He frames the phases of Mediterranean history in terms of how people used the sea—when and to what degree their exchanges, conflicts, and conversations united it and made it one coherent unit. Beyond the structural, environmental, or geographic elements, he asserted, it was individual and collective agency that shaped the human experience of the sea over centuries and even millennia.

Similarly, this book presents a Mediterranean on which individual people lived, worked, and sought security for their families. Their decisions, their motivations, and their experiences can form the basis for understanding the broader sweep of medieval Mediterranean history—one in which enduring structures and key events are played out in both large-scale

population movements and the ground-level experiences of individuals and their families. But in a short book like this, certain choices had to be made; therefore, not every century, theme, path of migration, or important upheaval is featured here. Nonetheless, starting in the seventh and ending in the thirteenth century, many of the important developments in Mediterranean history are represented in these profiles. The events that inspired these migrations are some of the key moments in Mediterranean history: conquests, mass conversions, climactic changes, and economic revolutions. By studying cross-Mediterranean migration in the medieval period, and by focusing on the lived experiences of migrants, I think we can understand the history of that time and place in new ways.

This book is also written for people who have asked historical questions about cross-Mediterranean migration: is this only a modern phenomenon or is there a historical element to it? How did pre-modern people think about issues of homeland and the loss of identity when trying to establish a new life elsewhere? Perhaps one might also ask whether walls or boundaries worked in the Middle Ages to slow or halt migration, or whether medieval history might inform our modern understanding of border walls. This book cannot definitively answer that last question, since it concerns a period in which the notion of state borders was very different than ours. However, we will see herein numerous examples of people who moved across barriers that might seem as impenetrable as walls or modern state borders—those of religion, language, or political allegiance, for example. And while they did not have to confront passport control kiosks, hostile coast guards, or immigration officers, we will see that for many medieval migrants the process of establishing a new life in a new land was fraught with difficulties, dangers, and obstructions similar in many ways to those of modern refugees. Others, however, appear to have found successful lives and profitable positions in new places.

Proceeding in roughly chronological order, we first look at Christian refugees fleeing the Muslim conquest of the Levant, some of whom rose to prominence within the Roman Church

in Italy. We then move to two Christian clerics, Theodore and Hadrian, from the Near East and North Africa respectively, both of whom migrated to early medieval England in order to take up senior positions in the Christian church based at Canterbury. While these men were appointed to England by the pope in Rome, archaeological evidence from the same centuries shows that they were by no means the only individuals from the Mediterranean Sea region who moved northward to live and work in the British Isles. In fact, early medieval England appears to have been closely linked to the Mediterranean region through economy, culture, travel, and migration.

From England, we move to Sicily, an island this book will return to several times. Situated at a vital geographical crossing point between the eastern and western basins of the Mediterranean Sea, and between its northern and southern shores, Sicily was regularly conquered, settled, and resettled throughout the Middle Ages. Ruled in turn by Roman emperors, Byzantine governors, Muslim emirs, and Latin kings, Sicily also housed a shifting and mixed population of Jews, Christians (Greek and Latin), and both Arab and Amazigh Muslims across this period. In these ways, it can show us some broad patterns of demographic change. Sicily also featured a number of active ports which were connected to searoutes going in all directions across the Mediterranean, meaning that travellers and migrants often found themselves passing through the island simply because many ships did so.

Just as we have seen in recent years the distressing images of refugees trying to reach the shores of Lampedusa or Sicily in ramshackle boats, so our case-studies show that Sicily has been a prominent destination for migration for a long time.³ But medieval migration patterns were remarkably multi-directional: they did not necessarily flow northward

3 For an archaeological study of the modern Tunisia to Sicily crossing and its long history, see Emma Blake and Robert Schon, "The Archaeology of Contemporary Migrant Journeys in Western Sicily," *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 32, no. 2 (2019): 173–94. Thanks to Sharon Kinoshita for bringing this article to my attention.

from Africa to Europe, as we might perceive modern ones to do. In fact, they often flowed in many directions at once, and Sicily was often a crossroads for both individual migrations and larger demographic shifts. First, we look at a young man who would come to be known as St. Elias the Younger, a Greek Christian Sicilian captured and enslaved by Muslim raiders. His initial migration away from the island was involuntary, but after escaping from the Christian family in North Africa who purchased him, he travelled widely throughout the Mediterranean and eventually returned to Sicily—by then a fully Muslim-controlled island.

The next chapter treats a man who voluntarily migrated in the opposite direction: Constantine the African moved from North Africa to Norman-held southern Italy. He greatly enriched the intellectual culture there by bringing Arabic medical books and knowledge, then translating them into Latin—making him a key figure in the development of early medieval medical and scientific knowledge in Europe. Constantine's story highlights the intellectual contributions that can be made by immigrants, and the transformative impact many medieval migrants had on their new home societies.

Next I return to Sicily, with several biographies of emigrants from the island during the turbulent years of the Norman conquest and their early kingdom. As Latin Christian invaders took over progressively more of the island's Muslim-ruled territory, the demographics of the entire Mediterranean region shifted dramatically. Jewish merchants, the subject of the first of these chapters, were active traders between Sicily and the northern shores of Africa; many of them chose to flee the island in search of safer homes. Their stories show that migration was often multi-directional, even while it was nearly always filled with uncertainty. A unique discovery of documents and letters sent among this mercantile community, called the Cairo Geniza, allows us to witness their fears and the dangers of migration up close. This chapter is followed by one about merchants as a group, both Jewish and Christian, who often relied upon their knowledge of foreign places and cultures to establish new lives abroad.

In contrast to the Jews whose stories are told in their own words, the Muslims who emigrated away from newly Christian Sicily are typically only seen in retrospect. We know, for example, of Muslim scholars and poets whose families traced their origins to Sicily, and who may have departed the island because of the Norman conquest but their biographies do not explicitly tell us so. One example is the Muslim jurist Imam al-Mazari, who lived and worked in North Africa but who issued judgments related to the Muslim community still living in Sicily. He, like other scholars and poets, such as Ibn Hamdis, maintained an identity that was closely connected with Sicily, long after their emigration. The final chapter on people immigrating away from Norman Sicily concerns the Muslims who did not get the chance to depart, despite their desire to do so. Focusing on one young woman who sought marriage with a foreign visitor in order to escape the island, this chapter also examines the migration experiences of women in general. It was always difficult for women to migrate alone, and it is also more difficult to access women's stories of migration and its effects.

Even while Jews and Muslims were departing from Sicily, the Norman conquerors encouraged Christian immigration to the island. The final chapter about Sicily is centred on the story of George of Antioch, a Greek Christian who found his way to the Norman Kingdom of Sicily and ascended to high rank there. But he was not the only Christian who moved to Sicily at the time: this chapter also presents Latin immigrants from northern Europe. In this period, it is clear that immigration was being managed by the Normans as a way of altering their island's demographics in ways that served their purposes.

Just like the Jews who left an increasingly hostile Sicily, the Jewish intellectual Moses Maimonides emigrated from Iberia after its conquest by the Alhomads from North Africa. The story of Maimonides demonstrates both the difficulty of finding a safe place to migrate to and also the emotional impact of migration. But, unlike the Jews who were forced out of increasingly homogenizing Christian monarchies of western Europe over the twelfth-fifteenth centuries, Maimonides and his

family immigrated out of a desire to live and worship among co-religionists rather than among a hostile majority culture.

The final profile returns to those who desired to live among people who shared their religious faith, this time as religious converts. Although most changes in religion came about as part of the demographic shifts that followed conquests and regime changes, some medieval individuals made the radical choice to adopt a non-dominant religion. When they did so, they usually also chose to relocate, both in order to avoid persecution from the community into which they were born and also in order to live and learn from co-religionists.

While these few stories by no means cover all of the migrants from the Middle Ages, I consider them representative of the primary motives for migration in the period. And while reading them, I hope you will keep in mind what they have to teach us about both the Middle Ages and today. Specifically, their stories help challenge some commonly-held assumptions about immigrants and migration. First, I have in mind the assumption that migration pathways always bring people towards Europe. In fact, these biographies show multi-directional movements crisscrossing the Mediterranean, with groups sometimes moving nearly simultaneously in opposite directions. Second, these stories challenge the assumption that refugees have nothing to offer the society to which they immigrate. To the contrary, we find numerous cases in which immigrants brought with them intellectual and artisanal expertise, valued goods and products, and much-needed skills and experience. And third, they contradict the assumption that migration disrupts an otherwise racially pure status quo, even though some foreign immigrants may have faced racialized hatred and hostility.

Just as it is today, migration in the Middle Ages was filled with danger, uncertainty, and difficulties of assimilation. But as you read these profiles, I hope you will see the ways that medieval migrants and modern ones alike represent a common yearning for safety and a profitable and secure livelihood—even if that meant uprooting a life and moving across land and sea to find a new home.

