

Matthew E. Parker

## **“Sinking Pisa: The Decline of a Commercial Empire in the Thirteenth Century”**

### Research Report

The travel grant awarded by the History Project and INET (Institute for New Economic Thinking) enabled me to travel to Florence, Italy to conduct archival research in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze for six weeks during the summer of 2015. This investigation was the final research component for my dissertation, “Sinking Pisa: The Decline of a Commercial Empire in the Thirteenth Century,” exploring the fall of Pisan maritime efficacy in the late thirteenth century. A significant portion of my research involves the examination of wills, personal correspondence, treaties and statutes to reconstruct the economy, merchant networks, daily business, and material culture of Pisan men and women in the late thirteenth century. I use these sources to elucidate the deeper societal causes and lasting effects of the permanent destruction of the Pisan fleet at the Battle of Meloria (1284). The battle is conventionally recognized as the turning point, though as I argue not the cause, of Pisa’s commercial decline. In particular, I look for trends that presaged the decline of Pisan maritime power in the years leading up to the battle itself. By examining documents from the decades following the battle, I am uncovering the impact of the event upon the populace of the city as evinced by shifts in conceptions of communal identity, in prevailing political and social concerns, and in approaches to inter-city, inter-regional and international endeavors.

I have opted for an interdisciplinary approach that rests firmly at the intersection of historical scholarship and economic analysis, believing that a composite image constructed from multiple approaches will finally permit a clearer rendering of this late chapter in the history of the Republic of Pisa. I utilize econometrics to interpret the various types of quantitative data, such as trade volumes and prices, gathered primarily from the notarial sources. The capacity for regression analyses to expose significant trends that would otherwise be invisible to investigators will be of particular benefit to this project. The burgeoning field of historical dynamic network analysis<sup>1</sup> will afford a clearer picture of the restructuring of merchant networks once my data set is complete. In other words, I examine how the nature of interpersonal networks changed as well as how the geographical trade networks themselves were altered.

A combination of econometric and sociologic inquiry provides insight into the roots of maritime collapse circa 1284 and explains the economic restructuring afterwards. Additionally, this investigation aims to serve as a model for future studies of the commercial documentation of Pisa's contemporaries. The resultant better understanding of the entire system will further inform reinterpretations of events in the locales where Pisan merchants traded. Beyond that, there are applications for examining the rise of Florentine mercantile power, and possibly even explaining why Genoa (which had risen to prominence at the same time as its rival, Pisa) continued to prosper and expand into the Atlantic.

Thanks to a travel grant for exploratory research from the Economic History Association in 2013, I have already identified and copied a significant portion of a large corpus of materials in the Archivio di Stato di Pisa and, to a lesser degree, in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze. However, at the time, my schedule and funding did not allow me to collect all of the materials

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowed from the statistical methodology of sociology; for a good example, see Van Doosselaere, *Commercial Agreements and Social Dynamics in Medieval Genoa*, 2009

that were available and relevant to my research. With the aid of the History Project Research Grant and supplementary funding from my home institution of Saint Louis University, I was able to finish examining and copying the remaining documents necessary for my dissertation.

While researching at the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, I was able to briefly examine numerous notarial registers and make copies of the ones that I deemed to be potentially fruitful for my research. Ideally, I will be able to utilize the Florentine records as a basis for comparison with the Pisan ones, not only exposing interconnections between contemporaneous merchants, but also displaying any trends in commerce relevant to Pisan affairs (did Florentine trade spike or dip following the Battle of Meloria? Were there indications of Florence already being on the ascendancy prior to the battle? How close were Florentine merchants tied to the fates of their Pisan contemporaries?). The registers I examined were: Notarile Antecosimiano (henceforth N.A.) 2487, the register of notary Bernardo di Rustichello, whose records are primarily from the early 1260s; N.A. 11250 and 11251, the register of Ildebrandino di Benvenuto, whose records mostly originate from the mid-1280s; N.A. 21110, the register of Vigoroso di Paradiso, whose records mostly come from the 1290s.

Although the majority of my time was spent in Florence, due to the proximity of Pisa to Florence I was able to make several daytrips to the Archivio di Stato di Pisa. Although I had already gathered most of the materials I needed on my first visit in 2013, I was fortunate enough to make copies of two notarial registers that will be indispensable for my research. Ospedale di Santa Chiara No. 2070 2072, the registers of the notary Bartolommeo di Iacopo di Carraia Gonnelle, cover the years 1283-1285 and 1312-1316, respectively. These particular registers are so valuable to my research because Bartolommeo took over the business of his older brother Ugolino, whose register from 1273 I had previously examined. Having assumed his brother's

clientele, I now have a window into the contractual relationships of a core base of repeat customers spanning roughly 40 years.

I am very grateful to the History Project and INET for enabling me to return to Tuscany to complete my archival research, allowing me to piece together the registers I needed in order to examine the commercial trends of two competing cities over roughly equivalent spans of time surrounding a traumatic event, the Battle of Meloria. I look forward with great eagerness to spending the next year delving deep into the documents with which I have returned, exploring the data for what can be learned about the decline of one of Italy's greatest maritime powers.