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The Black Death and Painters' Remuneration in the Kingdom of Majorca

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The fourteenth century — one of the most violent centuries in European history — also “marked one of the most violent oscillations in monetary flows, prices, and wages, with two prolonged periods of inflation, each followed by prolonged deflations.”¹ The goal of this paper is to reflect on the relation between fourteenth-century economic fluctuations and the income of medieval painters.

The particularly rich archives in Palma de Mallorca offer a unique opportunity to pursue this goal, and therefore, this paper will examine archival evidence concerning payments to painters in the Kingdom of Majorca throughout the fourteenth century. Overall, the social and economic situation in Majorca during the fourteenth century is anchored in the larger European or Mediterranean framework. Nevertheless, some political and economic particularities unique to the Balearics are worth mentioning.

¹ John Munro, “Before and After the Black Death: Money, Prices, and Wages in Fourteenth-Century England” in *New Approaches to the History of Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Per Ingesman and Troels Dahlerup (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2009), 335.

James I of Aragon conquered Islamic Majorca in 1229. In 1276, Majorca broke away from the Crown of Aragon to form an independent kingdom that, aside from the Balearics, included such territories in present-day France as Montpellier and Perpignan. During this period, Majorca enjoyed economic prosperity and growth.² Its strategic position in the Western Mediterranean helped it to become a trade hub of the utmost importance. Revenues from maritime commerce allowed the Kings of Majorca to finance large-scale building projects during the first decades of the fourteenth century such as Bellver Castle and the renovation of the former Islamic palace, the Almudaina.

The Black Death hit Majorca in 1348, and the kingdom's annexation by the Crown of Aragon followed soon after in 1349. Consequently, the Kingdom was deprived of its mainland territories and experienced a political and cultural reorientation. One year later, King Peter IV of Aragon ordered the Balearic Islands to contribute their share to the war effort as part of the Venetian-Genoese war, which lasted until 1355. Following the war, the political, social, and economical situation in Majorca became more and more unstable. The events of 1391, most notably the pogrom against the Jews, accentuated social strife and led to considerable political reconfigurations.³

To sum up these events, we witness a decisive rupture in the socioeconomic conditions in Majorca between the first and the second halves of the fourteenth century, a pattern that may be observed in many other places across Europe mainly due to the

² David Abulafia, *A Mediterranean Emporium: The Catalan Kingdom of Majorca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³ Alvaro Santamaría Arández, *El reino de Mallorca en la primera mitad del siglo XV* (Palma de Mallorca: Diputación provincial de Baleares, 1955); Alvaro Santamaría Arández, "Mallorca en el siglo XIV," *Anuario de estudios medievales* 7 (1971–1970): 253–278; Pablo Cateura Bennàsser, "El bipartidismo en la Mallorca de comienzos del siglo XV," *Bolletí de la Societat Arqueològica Lulliana* 41 (1985): 157–170; Jaume Serra i Barceló, "Un procés per faltes de 1417 i el context de les banderies (Mallorca-Segle XV)," *Bolletí de la Societat Arqueològica Lulliana*, no. 61 (2005): 13–38.

Black Death, but which was felt even more strongly in the Balearics due to idiosyncratic political events.

Painting in Majorca

Very little evidence regarding thirteenth-century painting in Majorca has survived both in terms of art work and documents, but the panorama changes dramatically for the fourteenth century. In 1977, Father Gabriel Llompart uncovered and compiled close to two hundred documents pertaining to painters in Majorca—a corpus that still forms the core of the surviving evidence today.⁴ The art of painting is not the only subject of this corpus, as different aspects of painters' lives such as real estate transactions, the sale of slaves, tax, inheritance, and trials are also documented in the notarial records.

As to the art of painting, the most common types of record to survive are, unsurprisingly, those concerned with monetary transactions. These transactions consist of two types of payments. First, there are records of payments for various works—painting rooms, coats of arms, flags, candles, weapons, religious objects, etc.—paid after the painter finished his work. And second, there are contracts that delineate the amount of money to be paid to the painter in the future, once the work has been completed.

Retable Prices

Very few transactions concerning retables from the first half of the fourteenth century survive. A document from 1330 records a payment to the painter Joan Loert for the Corpus Christi retable in the cathedral of Palma de Mallorca: "*Item pague a N Loert,*

⁴ Gabriel Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina: su entorno cultural y su iconografía*, vol. 4 (Palma de Mallorca: Luis Ripoll, 1977). Since Llompart, Tina Sabater has unearthed more documents pertaining especially to the fifteenth century. See Tina Sabater, *La pintura mallorquina del segle XV* (Palma: Edicions UIB, 2002).

pintor, per raó del reretaule del altar del cors de Jesuchrist que pintà... VII liures."⁵ Six years later, in 1336, the same Joan Loert painted three retables for the cathedral (dedicated to San Salvador, San Blas, and Todos los Martires), while the painter Martí Mayol painted four *bancals*:

Item pague a·N Loert, pintor, qui pintà los ditz tres reretaules e tres banquetz, e feu los arxetz d'or fin, a raó de X liures lo rertaule ab son banchet ... XXX liures.

*Item pague a·N Martin Mayol, pintor, qui pintà los romanents quatre banquetz, a raó de XV sous cascun ... III liures.*⁶

Moving forward to 1379, we find an elaborate contract between the painter Pere Marçol and the carders guild (*paratores* in Latin, *pelaires* in Castilian) to paint a large retable dedicated to the guild's patron St. Bartholomew measuring 18 × 20 palms (the equivalent of about 3.7 × 3.2 meters).⁷ The following is an excerpt from the contract concerning the payment to Marçol:

*Et hoc facio et facere promitto et pasciscor quod pro salario meo et pretio colorum ac folii auri et argenti predictorum, detis michi ac dare et solvere teneamini centum viginti libras regalium Majoricarum minorum per sequentes solutiones, videlicet viginti libras de presenti, et viginti libras in festo natiuitatis Domini, et viginti libras in festo pasche Domini, et residuas sexaginta libras inmediate completo dicto opere bene et perfecte.*⁸

⁵ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:50, doc. 63.

⁶ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:50, doc. 64.

⁷ For the palm, see Judith Berg Sobré, *Behind the Altar Table: The Development of the Painted Retable in Spain, 1350–1500* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 342.

⁸ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:73–76, doc. 123.

In the span of about forty years, we witness a dramatic rise in retable prices—from about ten libras in 1336 to one hundred and twenty libras in 1379.⁹ Naturally, differences in the painter's reputation, the materials used, the size of the work, and its function (a private retable, a chapel retable, or a retablo mayor) should be taken into account.¹⁰ It is true that cheaper retables were produced in the second half of the fourteenth century; for example, "only" thirty libras were paid for a San Miguel retable painted by Joan Daurer in 1374 for the parish church of the town of Muro.¹¹ Nevertheless, despite these considerations, it is safe to argue that the price of retables more than tripled in the second half of the fourteenth century compared to its first half.

This price increase could be related to the "golden age of labor" that followed the Black Death.¹² The scarcity of professional workers after the plague triggered a sudden spike in wages. Surviving artisans could now negotiate their salaries from a position of power. Wages rose three to five times higher than their pre-plague level and kings had to intervene to limit wages by imposing strict ordinances.¹³ In 1351, the Castilian Cortes complained that workers "demandauan tan grandes preçios et ssoldadas et jornales" and

⁹ Sometime between 1381 and 1383, Pere Marçol received one hundred libras for a smaller retable measuring 11 × 13 palms. See Llopart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:76–77, doc. 124.

¹⁰ In general, the dimensions of altarpieces in the Crown of Aragon increased from around 1360–1370.

¹¹ Llopart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:63, doc. 94. A now-lost contract from 1370 for the retable of San Jaime in Palma listed a price of twenty-nine libras; see doc. 93. In 1384, Pere Marçol received twenty libras to complete a retable with the carpentry already done; see doc. 125.

¹² Steven Epstein, *Wage Labor & Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 207–256; Samuel Cohn, "After the Black Death: Labour Legislation and Attitudes towards Labour in Late-Medieval Western Europe," *The Economic History Review* 60, no. 3 (2007): 457–485; Robert Braid, "Et non ultra: politiques royales du travail en Europe occidentale au XIVe siècle," *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes* 161, no. 2 (2003): 437–491; for Spain, see Charles Verlinden, "La grande peste de 1348 en Espagne: Contribution à l'étude de ses conséquences économiques et sociales," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 17, no. 1 (1938): 103–46; Gunnar Tilander, ed., *Fueros Aragoneses Desconocidos Promulgados a Consecuencia de La Gran Peste de 1348*, *Leges Hispanicae Medii Aevi* 9 (Stockholm: Offset-Lito, 1959).

¹³ Jaume Sobrequés i Callicó, "La Peste Negra en la Península Ibérica," *Anuario de estudios medievales*, no. 7 (1971): 86–87; Verlinden, "La grande peste de 1348 en Espagne," 128–29; Epstein, *Wage Labor & Guilds in Medieval Europe*, 286, n. 132 and the relevant pages in ch. 5.

moved on to impose wage-and-price policies.¹⁴ John the Good, King of France, forbade artisans to charge more than one third over pre-plague rates. However, with the exception of England, these ordinances had a limited effect. In Aragon, King Peter IV even went as far as to abolish the ordinances in 1352, only three years after the plague.¹⁵

As John Munro has remarked, it is important to consider the fluctuations of prices to determine the real wages of workers after the Black Death.¹⁶ According to his analysis of prices in England, the third quarter of the fourteenth century was dominated by high inflation that compensated for the increase in wages. Other studies provide somewhat different data. According to the Polish historian Bronisław Geremek, for example, wheat prices in Paris remained relatively constant throughout the century.¹⁷ In any case, most scholars agree that prices dropped to their pre-plague levels during the last quarter of the century. The result was that painters, or at least the successful among them, earned substantially more money in the late fourteenth century not only in terms of the amounts they were paid, but also in terms of real wages.

Moreover, it seems that painters were one of the artisanal professions to benefit most from the increase in wages. In their study “Seven Centuries of Building Wages,” E. H. Phelps-Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins demonstrated that the daily wages of building craftsmen in southern England doubled after the Black Death.¹⁸ According to Earl J.

¹⁴ *Córtés de los antiguos reinos de Leon y de Castilla. Publicadas por la Real Academia de la Historia*, vol. II (Madrid: M. Rivadeneyra, 1863), 76.

¹⁵ Verlinden, “La grande peste de 1348 en Espagne,” 127.

¹⁶ Munro, “Before and After the Black Death.”

¹⁷ Bronisław Geremek, *Le salariat dans l'artisanat parisien aux XIIIe-XVe siècles: Etude sur le marché de la main-d'oeuvre au Moyen Age*, trans. Anna Posner and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968), esp. the graphs on p. 123.

¹⁸ E. H. Phelps-Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, “Seven Centuries of Building Wages,” *Economica* 22, no. 87 (1955): 195–206; E. H. Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, “Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, Compared with Builders’ Wage-Rates,” *Economica* 23, no. 92 (1956): 296–314.

Hamilton, salaries in Valencia increased by more than twenty percent,¹⁹ and Geremek showed that the wages of stonemasons and slaters almost tripled in Paris.²⁰ Despite these substantial increases, painters' remuneration multiplied even more, as exemplified by the retable prices described above.

Painters' now much-larger income could have had far-reaching consequences for them and their products. Increased income could translate into increased social mobility, so painters after the Black Death could move more easily up the social ladder. In the last decades of the fourteenth century, we find painters in Majorca who are awarded with the title *royal familiar*, a highly prestigious and coveted title that allowed them more-direct access to the court, preferable treatment by royal authorities and officials, and the license to carry swords and other normally outlawed weapons, as well as immunity from ordinary tribunals.²¹ For example, on July 1, 1370, King Pedro IV honored the Mallorcan painter Pere Marçol with this title.²² Two years earlier, on April 15, 1368, the title had been awarded to the Jewish mapmaker, illuminator, and painter of compasses Cresques Abraham.²³

Daily Wages

Painters were also employed in the building projects of the beginning of the century, including the construction of Bellver Castle and the Almudaina mentioned above. Their names are recorded in the books of the works, or *llibres de obras*, of the

¹⁹ Earl J. Hamilton, *Money, Prices, and Wages in Valencia, Aragon, and Navarre, 1351–1500*, Harvard Economic Studies, vol. II, v. 51 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 69.

²⁰ Geremek, *Le salariat dans l'artisanat parisien*, esp. 123.

²¹ Hans Schadek, "Die Familiaren der sizilianischen und aragonischen Könige im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kulturgeschichte Spaniens* 26 (1971): 201–348.

²² Llompарт, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:71–72, doc. 118.

²³ *Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó*, Canc. Reg. 1426, fol. 74r-v. Jaume Riera, "Cresques Abraham jueu de Mallorca, mestre de mapamundis i de brúixoles," in *L'atlas català* (Barcelona: Diàfora, 1975), 14–22.

respective projects. Thus, in the *llibre d'obra de Bellver*, for example, we find the following payment record from November 8, 1309: “*Item a·N Francesch Cavaler, pintor, per V dies, a II s., II d., ... X s., X d.*”²⁴ About three months later, the same Francesch Cavaler also appears in a record of one of the *llibres d'obra del palau reial de l'Almudaina* from February 6, 1310: “*Item a·N Francesch Cavaler, per III dies, a II s...VI s.*”²⁵ In these monumental projects, then, painters, like other artisans, received wages based on the amount of days they worked. The daily rate for Cavaler was two sous or two sous and two diners, although less-successful painters such as the Jew Abraham ben Auhac earned as little as seven diners per day: “*Item a·N Abraham, pintor, per III dies, a VII d., ... I s., VIII d.*”²⁶ Two decades later, in 1328, the painter Martí Mayol, as well as others, worked in the cathedral for higher wages: “*Item pague a·N Martí Mayol, pintor, qui comensà a pintar la fusta del dit passatge dels orgens per III diez, a raó de III sous, III diners per dia ...*”²⁷ However, in 1309, the same Martí had earned only twenty-two diners per day: “*Item a·N Martí Mayol, per V dies, a XXII d., ... VIII. S., II d.*”²⁸ This difference of about 75 percent between the daily wages in 1309 and 1328 can be attributed to inflation and/or to professional development.

Interestingly, in his seminal compilation Llompart did not list documents from the second half of the fourteenth century recording daily wages for painters. Therefore, based on the surviving evidence, painters were employed on a daily basis only in the first half of the century. This change can be explained by the way in which monumental building campaigns were administered. In the large-scale building projects pursued by the independent kings of Majorca at the beginning of the century, craftsmen were often (but not always) paid per day of labor. It may seem that daily wages were tied to monumental

²⁴ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:38–39, doc. 30.

²⁵ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:38, doc. 29.

²⁶ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:38–39, doc. 30.

²⁷ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:44, doc. 44. See also docs. 55–58.

²⁸ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:38–39, doc. 30.

campaigns and, therefore, that daily wages became irrelevant once the campaigns terminated. However, works in the cathedral were continuous. As we have seen, the painter Martí Mayol, who worked in the cathedral, was paid per day in 1309 and in 1328. In contrast, in the second half of the century, works commissioned in the cathedral were priced according to the nature of the work (and if relevant, also according to the number of items painted) and not per day. For example, in 1392, Pere Marçol painted the mobile star for the liturgical drama of the Epiphany in the cathedral: "*Item paguí En Mersol, pintor, per la astela dells III Reys, costà entre pintar e sos trabals... VIII sous, VI diners.*"²⁹ He also painted candles for the cathedral in 1394: "*Item paguí de pintar los dits XVI siris a En Marsol, per cascún siri III d., son quatre sous ... IIII s.*"³⁰

In the history of art, the transition from daily wages to price per commission is pivotal, as it places emphasis on the product rather than on labor. In that regard, the comparison between painters and carpenters is illuminating. "With average earning approximately 21 per cent above those of the master stonecutter, 13 per cent above those of the master mat maker, and 8 per cent above those of the master mason the master carpenter was the most highly rewarded artisan," at least until the Black Death.³¹

In a record from 1336, we can see that a carpenter's daily wages were more or less like those of the painter, if not higher: "*Item pague a.N G. Vilar, fuster, per tres dies en los quals feu los ditz tres reretaules e VII banquetz, e entretayla, e feu roses els ditz banchetz, a raó de III sous, IIII diners per dia ...*"³² A few decades later in 1375, the carpenter's wages rose slightly from three sous and four diners to three sous and seven diners: "*E En Botet, fuster,*

²⁹ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:81, doc. 128.

³⁰ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:81, doc. 129.

³¹ Hamilton, *Money, Prices, and Wages*, 70.

³² Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:50, doc. 64.

... a raó de III sous, VIII diners per día..."³³ However, the important point here is that carpenters, despite the high status of their craft, still received daily salaries in the second half of the fourteenth century, while painters did not.

The examination of records of payment to painters in Majorca throughout the fourteenth century reveals two important patterns. First, the price of retables multiplied dramatically from around ten libras before the Black Death to more than one hundred libras afterward.³⁴ This trend continued well into the fifteenth century, when we can find retables with a price tag of more than two hundred libras.³⁵ Second, painters stopped receiving daily wages and instead were paid per commission.

Taken together, these two changes bore far-reaching implications. After the Black Death, painters could acquire more wealth. They also set themselves apart from other craftsmen, such as carpenters, according to how their work was priced. These developments opened up the possibility for more social mobility³⁶ and the reconfiguration of the status of the painter and his art.³⁷ In a well-known work, Hans

³³ Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:59, doc. 85. The contract is for work for the cathedral chapter of Gerona. However, the primary artisan, Ramón Gilabert, is from Mallorca. The assumption here is that prices and wages in Mallorca and Gerona are not that different.

³⁴ In the first half of the fourteenth century, the kings of Majorca invested large sums in monumental works such as Bellver, the Almudaina, and the Cathedral. In the second half of the century, after the disintegration of the independent kingdom, the scale of public works diminished substantially. It is tempting to speculate that some of the funds that previously were available for investment in public works were now invested in paintings. In other words, painting replaced architecture as a medium suitable for high-end patronage, due in part to the new political circumstances.

³⁵ For retable prices in the fifteenth century, see Table 5 in Berg Sobré, *Behind the Altar Table*, 370–71.

³⁶ Aside from the title *royal familiar* mentioned before, we witness in the fifteenth century painters who simultaneously pursue their craft and large-scale mercantile activity. Joan Rosat is an example in Mallorca of these painter-merchants. The ability of painters to become merchants—who had a higher social status than that of a craftsman—possibly attests to the painters' increased social mobility. On Joan Rosat, see Sabater, *La pintura mallorquina del segle XV*, 226–247.

³⁷ Interestingly, in the ordinances of the painters' guild of Mallorca from 1486, the painters refer to their craft, like we do today, as art — "l'art de pintors." See Llompart, *La pintura medieval mallorquina*, 4:27–29, doc. 22. The term "art" was not used in this context earlier in the Middle Ages. See Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004), 45–62.

Belting framed the distinction between the era of the image and the era of art.³⁸ What distinguishes the latter from the former is an art market that places emphasis, among other things, on the notions of the individual genius artist, art for art's sake, and the prominence of painting as a medium.

If the situation in Majorca can be taken to represent that of other parts of Europe as well, then one of the main reasons for the emergence of the concept of art as we know it today was the economic restructuring of artistic production by artisans resulting from the Black Death. In other words, the Black Death marks the watershed between the era of the image and the birth of art. 🐼

³⁸ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).