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## Marco Tangheroni

David Abulafia

### I.

It is a great honour to have the opportunity to commemorate the life and work of a friend a colleague of such distinction as Marco Tangheroni. For me, he always stood at the forefront of a group of historians of the medieval Mediterranean; his great skill lay in his ability both to write clearly and accessibly for the wider public about his historical interests, while at the same time he possessed a remarkable skill in excavating the documentary sources and in exposing new areas of study, and approaches to old subjects. He was a familiar presence at congresses large and small. I recall one gathering in Pisa where he brought together not just those talented Pisan scholars who have done so much to advance our knowledge of the medieval Mediterranean – I may be excused for mentioning Pino Petralia at this point – but historians from Barcelona, Valencia and elsewhere – Paulino Iradiel in particular.

I have particular memories of his presence at the Congresses of the History of the Crown of Aragon, not least the very lavish and successful one that was held in Alghero in Sardinia in 1990. By then I knew him personally, though it was several years since I had walked past the famous Libreria Tombolini in Rome and seen in the window his book *Aspetti del commercio dei cereali nei Paesi della Corona d'Aragona*, which I immediately bought. That book was published here in Cagliari by the institute set up to examine relations between Spain and Italy, and was one of the most distinguished in a very distinguished series of volumes. What struck me most forcefully was Tangheroni's ability to look at the wider Mediterranean picture. This was not simply a study of how Sardinia provisioned neighbouring lands; the book provided a sense of how the grain trade fitted into the politics and economy of the whole of the western Mediterranean, and it was particularly valuable in reminding historians unfamiliar with the history of this island of its significance in a wider Mediterranean context.

Marco Tangheroni interested himself not simply in the impersonal forces that influenced the conduct of Mediterranean trade, which had been the focus of so many influential studies by Fernand Braudel's followers. I think that one of the issues that drew us together was an agreement that the Mediterranean past is more about its people than about the geographical contours of the Mediterranean. We all owe an immense amount to the *Annales* school of historians, but Marco was aware that the time had come to redress the balance. We can see this clearly in his first book, on the Aliata, published as long ago as 1969, in which he analysed the role in the political and economic life of the city of one of the pre-eminent Pisan families; we can see this too in his *Politica, commercio, agricoltura a Pisa nel Trecento*, of 1973. Drawn as he was to the intense and important relationship between Pisa and Sardinia, he was not simply a historian of the two places, or of the relationship between these places. Paradoxically, this emerges clearly from one of his books that might appear to have a relatively narrow focus, *Città dell'argento* (1985), which does so much to illuminate the economic, institutional and indeed financial history of the Pisan, Catalan and Sardinian world of the late Middle Ages. It was his ability both to write for a wider audience and to set Sardinia in its medieval Mediterranean setting that led me to invite him to write three pieces that appeared in English; I was also anxious to introduce his methods and approach to an English-speaking audience. One of these pieces was a study of Sardinia and Corsica from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, in the *New Cambridge Medieval History*; this was the only chapter in the whole eight-volume series to deal with Sardinia, so it was a precious addition to a series of books which claimed, rightly or wrongly, to provide a comprehensive survey of medieval European history. Then he wrote a chapter on Sardinia for the *Short Oxford History of Italy*, for which I edited the volume on the central Middle Ages. This was once again achieved with consummate skill and concision, and is the only chapter dedicated to Sardinia – oddly enough – in a series that covers the history of Italy from the early Middle Ages to the present day. Let me cite a characteristic passage in which he looks at the penetration of Sardinia by the Pisans and the Genoese:

It is preferable – in our view – to speak of Pisans and Genoese, rather than Pisa and Genoa. It is true that the two cities, after alternating phases of anti-Muslim collaboration and the early conflicts of the



eleventh century, appear to have been locked into an almost permanent war against each other for the entire twelfth century, during which control over Sardinia and Corsica was one of the central issues. Nevertheless, it is important to underline the variety of Pisan and Genoese forces holding an interest in Sardinia. It is misleading to talk of "dominators" and "dominated", as if these words represented monolithic groups. Among them were a variety of interests: the great Ligurian and Tuscan noble families, religious orders, great merchants, lesser merchants and artisans, and even barely known individuals. These interests gathered together in various ways, sometimes with converging objectives, at other times with opposing ones. Furthermore, at least in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the four insular kingdoms were capable of their own political initiatives, taking advantage of the possibility of aligning here with Genoa, there with Pisa – a dangerous political strategy that in the end would drag them towards dissolution.

Here, certainly, we can see him expressing clearly his fascination with the actors as well as with the stage on which they strutted.

However, I asked for more from him. His work encompassed the entire Mediterranean, as we can see from his distinguished contribution to the proceedings of a conference held in Jerusalem in 1984, dedicated to the Italian communities in the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem. In his magisterial book on *Commercio e Navigazione nel Medioevo* he showed an ability to look beyond his familiar Mediterranean waters, encompassing also the history of navigation in the medieval Atlantic and North Sea; nor did he confine himself to the history of "Latin" navigation, for Greeks, Jews and Muslims also received due treatment in this book; he dealt with Vikings, crusaders, Ottomans; he looked at the daily life of sailors; he examined the design of ships and how this changed over time. In other words, he brought together the history of the great events within the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, alongside what Braudel would have called the "daily rhythms" of life on the surface of the sea. It is this attention to the human history of the medieval seas that I want to underline, for it is a distinguishing characteristic of Marco Tangheroni's work. This book appeared with the eminent publishing house of Laterza in 1996, and I have been hoping that some day there will be translations into other languages, since this book will make an ideal introduction to the history of medieval maritime commerce. Unfortunately, it seems to be very difficult to persuade publishers in the English-speaking world to translate books, even while

in Italy so many books written in English and other languages do get translated. The best I could do was to ask him to write, once again for the *Short Oxford History of Italy*, a chapter on the trade of medieval Italy, which is a model of clarity and good sense, and also, of course, up-to-date in its command of the literature.

At the end of his Laterza book, Marco grappled with the difficulties we all have in understanding the economy and society of late medieval Europe and the Mediterranean. He spoke of how much we understand of the period, but also of the unknowable realities of that era: «Questo mistero è nascosto all'interno degli uomini» («this mystery is concealed within human beings»). For Marco Tangheroni, writing history was a humanistic activity, in the full sense of the term: people and their decisions stand at the centre of every discussion, even allowing for the sort of external, impersonal factors justifiably mentioned (but over-emphasized) by the *Annales* school, not to mention various Marxist schools of historians.

## II.

This takes me to Marco's interest in theoretical approaches to history, and in particular to the book we are celebrating today. Although his longstanding interest in this area was fuelled by another great historian from the University of Pisa, Cinzio Violante, his interests encompassed figures such as Kiekegaard. The works of a Colombian writer, Nicolás Gómez Dávila, provided him with a particular inspiration; the "aphorisms" of Gómez Dávila helped him, he tells us, organise his thoughts in a structured way around the problems Gómez Dávila was trying to air. But he did not want to write a book about Gómez Dávila, who is not well-known outside his native land; what he aimed to do was to take the concise, thought-provoking statements of Gómez Dávila and to use them as the launching-pad for his own thoughts about the meaning and writing of history. More precisely, he began with Pannenberg's observation that:

la riflessione epistemologica d'una disciplina si deve compiere secondo due aspetti: da un lato deve prendere in considerazione il rapporto esterno con le altre scienze semplicemente sul piano della scienza;

dall'altro deve esaminare l'organizzazione interna della disciplina in questione

Such a view not surprisingly elicited sympathy from Marco, who always insisted not just on a specific local phenomenon (such as the silver mines of Iglesias), but also on the relationship between that phenomenon and its wider context.

Marco was suspicious of easy, over-simplified explanations, including, as I have said, those of Marxist historians: he cited the aphorism of Gómez Dávila that «ciò che non è complicato è falso». This did not mean, as is abundantly clear from his writings, that historians should avoid over-simplification. He realised that the task of the historian is to interpret and make sense, and that does involve drawing bold lines across the page. For Tangheroni

domandare il rispetto della complessità della storia non significa rinunciare a mettere un certo ordine, a stabilire connessioni, a riporre linee di riorganizzazione del passato (...) in una parola a comprendere e a spiegare.

But to impose a formula on the past and to try to fit everything into that is not acceptable. Marco cites the opinion of Gómez Dávila that «lo storico che parla di causa, e non di cause, deve naturalmente essere valutato negativamente». Or, to cite Gómez Dávila by way of Marco Tangheroni, «un lessico di dieci parole è sufficiente al marxista per spiegare la storia» – maybe rather a severe judgment, but also an important warning against dogmatism, and against trying to write a type of history that looks forward to the perfection of humankind (on earth or in heaven), rather than back to the real people it is our duty to describe. One of the most moving images that Tangheroni offers is that of the historian making the dead speak. The historian is seen to enter into a dialogue with the dead, whom the historian resuscitates. We look backwards, but not forwards – we are not prophets: »la storia è incapace di previsioni«.

In this little book Marco also came to grips with the triumphs and failures of modern historiography, always in search of new realms to conquer, by way of psych-analysis, linguistics, semiotics or geography; he noted that Gómez Dávila had particular reservations about the over-eager use of sociological theory, which, I must say, has been an

increasing trend in recent years. Tangheroni was worried that the *Annales* historians, or at least the less inspired ones, have placed too great an emphasis on "structures", as perhaps even in the very important work of Pierre Toubert on medieval Lazio. Marco was also worried that significant themes, such as the history of law, were being discarded as too "old-fashioned", whatever that might mean to a historian; he was justifiably worried at the heavy emphasis among historians on specialisation, which had its ill effects as well as advantages. Never, he warned, lose sight of the big picture: "i ricercatori possono arrivare a sapere una quantità impressionante di cose sui peli della coda dei leoni, ma poi non saprebbero riconoscere un leone in carne ed ossa."

To conclude, I return to the great humanistic theme on which Marco insisted, as an act of faith: «non dobbiamo dimenticare che gli individui studiati dalla storia sono, in primo luogo, persone umane»; so an earthquake, for instance, interests historians because of its consequences for human beings. Historians are not experts in metaphysics, and we leave making sense of this world to theologians and philosophers. But, he insisted, there is a real past, and we must avoid historical relativism and post-modernist positions: «la storia è ricerca della verità», «una descrizione vera del passato», even if the historian cannot avoid subjectivity in the way he or she writes about the past. Our task is to create order within what at first sight seems the chaos of past times: «la distanza temporale consente allo storico di cercare di mettere ordine nel passato.» This is extremely difficult to do well: to cite Gómez Dávila, «per essere uno storico si richiede un talento raro. Per fare storia basta un poco di impudicizia». Marco Tangheroni possessed a rare talent, which, as we see from this small book, extended beyond the exposition of the past into an understanding of the duties and responsibilities of the historian. He wrote a humanistic type of history that was infused with the humility we should all feel as historians and scholars of the humanities. He would not let us forget that we must be humble when we try to write the lives of real people who breathed, thought and dreamed.



