

Prologue: Robert Sturmy's Last Voyage

On Friday 9 June 1458, a pirate ship swerved and fired on two Bristolian trading boats as they passed the coast of Malta, on their return from the Levant. I found the event transcribed in a legal document of the fifteenth century.¹ I could see the inky vessels with their lost signatures, the *Katherine Sturmy* and the *Marie*, trapped in the footnotes of an unwritten narrative. These ships of the Bristol merchant Robert Sturmy contained over £18,000 worth of Syrian and Mediterranean goods – nearly £11.6 million in contemporary terms.² The cargo contained sweet wines, spices, jewels, silks, and the mineral alum. These were high-status commodities, with the potential to shift the fortunes of their traders and the city to which they were returning. This event, its protagonists, and their cargo belong to a history of cultural encounter, failure, and desire.

'Today, on the 18th June', wrote the Viceroy of Sicily in Latin, in a letter sent to King Henry VI of England, a man called John Heyton came 'to this Isle of Ghawdex'. Heyton was injured and grieving, recalling how, as he and Robert were sailing past Malta, a 'carvel of Genoa attacked . . . and chased them'. The attacking ships were captained by the notorious pirate Giuliano Gattiluso (1435–80). The survivors who returned to England described how they were 'horribly and *hevously* without pity and compassion *murdred, slayne*, drowned and cast into the *see*'.³ The chase lasted three days – before the pirates captured the ships and, in the words of the Viceroy of Sicily, 'placed the said John and the said Robert and others who after the harsh battle and cruel slaughter and bloodshed remained half-alive, on the Isle of Malta. And they sailed to Libya with the two ships.'⁴

I find myself unable to resist my own fantasies as I read these historical records – I can see Robert left bleeding on the beach, his shirt ripped, as John, his partner, tries to lift him – I can see the doctors and priests running towards them as Robert presses his lips to the other man's wet shirt and tastes the salt on his tongue which is the sea, and which is his own blood – John crying as Robert, his captain, begins to lose consciousness.

Snap out of it, I think – this is not a movie. Or is it? The medievalist Carlo Ginzburg asked rhetorically: 'Without cinema, without the close-up' would the critic 'have been able to speak of microhistory?'⁵ In electing to structure my study around one specific historical journey, I was motivated by Michael Wintroub's study of the voyages taken by the humanist poet and sailor Jean Parmentier from France to Sumatra in 1529.⁶ Like Wintroub, I see the voyage as a route into understanding the society which framed its departure.

On 11 June 1458, Sturmy died, leaving a widow in Bristol, Ellen (née Talbot). Gattilusio commandeered his ships with their precious cargo and steered them to Libya. Sturmy's business partner, John Heyton, survived and made his way home with the crew who survived.

The Trials of the Genoese

When he returned to England, Heyton brought a case before King Henry VI 'in his own name and that of Robert Sturmy'.⁷ He argued that they deserved compensation for the value of the lost goods – and an additional £10,000 damages for 'the *hevynous affraye*, grievous *woundyng*, maiming and blood-letting of them done by the Genoese . . . and for their *lechecraft* [medicines], costs and expenses done by them in . . . coming home by *straunge* countries'.⁸ The pirate Gattilusio was out of reach in Libya. Instead, the Genoese residents in London and Southampton were rounded up on royal command, imprisoned and put on trial for the value of the lost goods. One chronicler wrote that 'the *Jannays* took *Stumyes* ship of *Bristow* . . . which had been in *hethenesse*. Wherefore the Genoese *beyng* in London were arrested and put into the Fleet, and were adjudged to pay for the *harmys* that their *nacion* had done.'⁹ In the medieval period, the term *natio* was used to describe a person's place of birth and mother tongue.¹⁰ The discourse and emergent structure of nationhood was already present in the Middle Ages, although the modern nation-state was not yet in operation.¹¹

The trials of the Genoese took place between August and November 1458. The records give a sense of the status of the incident. A man called William Denys of Devonshire came forward to give evidence. He made his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1458, at the same time and along the same routes as Sturmy's trading vessels – their ships passed one another in the Mediterranean. Returning from Jerusalem, he reached Rhodes, where he learned of the Genoese ships 'which had robbed Robert Sturmy and John Heytone'. Denys learned that the same pirate ships were

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(apparently) on their way to capture the Earl of Worcester, a fellow passenger on his ship – and so the group travelled swiftly to Corfu in order to find new ships to avoid the attack. In Corfu, they were told that the Genoese still sailed with Sturmy's ships, which they were taking 'together with the merchandise of the English to be sold in another place'. From Corfu, Denys travelled through the Adriatic Sea to Poreč, where he was told that Sturmy's other ship, the *Marie*, had been sent away with all the merchandise, to be sold. From Poreč he crossed over to Venice, where the rumour was that the Genoese state had sent sailors to aid Gattiluso.¹² In each stop on his voyage, Denys learned news of the event – showing how reports moved around these connected locations. The goods on Sturmy's ships were significant and valuable enough that their loss was an international sensation.

Elizabeth Lambourn's microhistory of the twelfth-century Judeo-Arabic luggage list of the merchant Abraham Ben Yiju takes his inventory as a starting point for a portrait of twelfth-century trade across the Indian Ocean, opening up everyday experiences of premodern travel and exchange.¹³ Setting off into the critical waters which Wintroub's and Lambourn's books have cleared, this book contains a cultural history of the Syrian and Mediterranean commodities on Sturmy's ships: sweet wine, spices, silks, jewels, and the mineral alum.

Voyaging between Histories

Sturmy's failure came at a critical moment in the history of English trade and global relations. Across the imagination of the scene hovers a grid, the lines of an undrawn map. Paul Gilroy writes that ships are 'cultural and political units'.¹⁴ These premodern ships were the units of an unfixed culture and a changeable politics, hovering between these states: ownership, citizenship, relationship. Their status is hard to define. The financial scale of Sturmy's venture implies that his aim was to create a direct maritime link between Bristol and the Levant, cutting out the Italian intermediaries who monopolised the market. In 1458, merchants sailing back to Bristol were – what? The symbolism of these voyages is uneasy – trade, on the verge of colonialism, on the brink: the coastline of histories. As Cord Whitaker has argued, while 'modernity is where we expect to find race', the race-thinking of the Middle Ages had a direct influence on early modern colonialism.¹⁵ But Sturmy travelled in the wake of ships which came before him, and was travelling towards an unconquerable global centre. Insofar as his ship inscribed English power that was a known

fantasy, the futility of which was realised in the encounter with imperial command, in the marketplaces of the Mamlūk Empire.

If Sturmy had travelled towards Syria two centuries earlier, he would have been travelling towards European Christian settlements. From the eleventh to the thirteenth century, the Frankish crusaders had occupied select territories across Syria, following the call for holy war from Rome.¹⁶ These were the crusader states: Edessa (1097–1150), Antioch (1098–1287), Tripoli (1102–1289), and Jerusalem (1099–1291).¹⁷ Together these states were known in Europe as 'Syria' or 'Outremer' – the lands *outré-mer*, beyond the sea – and have been described as colonial-style settlements.¹⁸ In 1187, Jerusalem was conquered. After that, Acre ['Akka/'Akko] was the capital of the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem. The crusaders never captured Aleppo or Damascus: even at the peak of Christian rulership, major regions of Syria remained unattainable. From the mid thirteenth century, all of the Christian settlements were in steady decline.¹⁹ In 1291, the Mamlūk Empire recaptured the last crusader settlement of Acre. The Mamlūk Empire (1250–1517) extended across Egypt and Syria, establishing these locations as global centres of trade and cultural production, which medieval Europeans could emulate, but could not surpass. By the time Sturmy arrived in the Mediterranean, these dynamics were well established.

As European trade with the Mamlūk Empire continued to grow, the likelihood of Christian settlement of Syria continued to decline. Janet Abu-Lughod has shown that medieval Europe was economically dependent on global networks.²⁰ Some scenes surrounding the objects on Sturmy's ships will foreshadow and record histories of European settlement and extraction – but they also witness the realities of an alternative premodern economic system. These commodities are ambivalent signifiers, containing foreboding but also remembering a moment when the British Empire was not inevitable.

Still, Sturmy has been seen as a precursor to the colonial traders who followed him. Evan Jones writes: 'Any analysis of why England – a relatively small and poor country – became Europe's premier economy has to begin with Sturmy.'²¹ David Abulafia comments of Sturmy's conflict with the Genoese that: 'These were the violent beginnings of the ties between England and the Mediterranean that would transform the sea in later centuries.'²² But seeing Sturmy's voyage as a 'beginning' is not entirely accurate. Sturmy was travelling along marine paths which had been crossed for at least 300 years, and all of the commodities on his ships were already circulating within well-established international networks.²³ Although the

Robert Sturmy before the Voyage

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movement towards European colonialism had already begun elsewhere – the first shipment of African slaves had arrived in Portugal in 1444 – it did not begin with Sturmy. In 1497, the Bristol-based, Genoese-born John Cabot sailed out in search of the sources of spices, reaching North America, an action which has been seen as laying the foundations for British colonisation.²⁴ In the sixteenth century, the international trade routes from Bristol became the paths of the transatlantic slave trade, with Bristol becoming England's main port for the slave trade in the early eighteenth century.²⁵ These later voyages wash throughout the history which separates Sturmy from the present day. For example, several of the texts in this study survive in manuscripts donated to the British Library by Hans Sloane, who owned slaves and whose additional wealth was derived from his marriage to the widow of a plantation owner.²⁶ These realities shape the preservation, reception and aftermath of the narratives described in this project: but Sturmy's relationship to these histories is inconclusive. As Matthew X. Vernon writes: 'By turning our gaze to the medieval period we can see what might be called a pre-history to later patterns of desire and appropriation' which 'must be repeatedly reconsolidated with maneuvers that create the space for unexpected correspondences between identities'.²⁷

In *Poetics of Relation*, the postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant describes how 'Root identity . . . rooted the thought of self and of territory and set in motion the thought of the other and of Voyage.' The imperial ship transported a sense of self-centrality with it, constructing the Other as the inverse of that dominant subject. While the ship was moving, its captain – subjectively – was not. By contrast: Relation identity 'does not think of a land as a territory from which to project toward other territories . . . Relation identity exults the thought of errantry'.²⁸ Instead of taking a Voyage in a single direction, the Relational subject wanders between places. As a trader, Sturmy's journey was not errant – but he was not an imperial captain either. I take these ambivalences and uncertainties as a starting point for analysis: a route into an unfixed cultural moment.

Robert Sturmy before the Voyage

Little is known of Robert Sturmy until the 1430s, at which point he began his career as a merchant-sailor. Like other Bristol merchants, he started by trading goods in Ireland and Gascony. By the mid 1440s, Sturmy had begun importing rare dyes, citrus fruits, and paper – and also began exporting English wool to Pisa, indicating that he had managed to create a network of professional connections in Italy.

In 1446, Sturmy made his first trading voyage beyond Europe.²⁹ A fifteenth-century notebook records 'the voyage of Robert Sturmy to Jerusalem 1446'. The author, William Worcester (1415–1482), was the secretary of the landowner Sir John Falstoff (1380–1459), and made his notes while travelling around South-Western England. He wrote: '*memorandum* that in the month of July . . . Robert *Sturmyn*, merchant of the town of Bristol, began his voyage of the port of Bristol from King Road to Jerusalem, with about 160 pilgrims'. It was common for merchants to fund their ventures by taking paying passengers. Worcester goes on to describe how returning from

the port of Jaffa . . . by the island of Modon the ship, called the *Cog Anne*, was on the 23rd December by a sudden storm and strong wind arising in the dark and dead of night suddenly and without warning driven on a rock and ashore, and thirty-seven of the passengers and seamen were drowned, to the very great grief of their friends in Bristol, and of their wives.

The pilgrims were not on board – they had chosen to return home overland. At the island of Modon 'a certain devout bishop' buried the bodies of the thirty-seven dead and 'founded a holy chapel there to pray for their souls and for those of all the faithful departed'.³⁰

That time Sturmy survived. When he returned to Bristol he refocused his ambitions on local government. In 1450, he became a town councillor. In 1451, he was made sheriff. In 1453, he rose to the position of mayor. During this period, he kept lodgings for foreign merchants – who, according to medieval law, typically needed an official host in order to be allowed residency in England.³¹ He continued to put money in ships: in 1454 he funded the cost of 'a stately *vessell*, only for the *werre*'.³²

And in 1457, ten years after his last traumatic attempt, Sturmy applied to King Henry VI for a new international trading licence. He was awarded a trading permit for £37,000 worth of tin, lead, cloth, and wool – England's premier exports – which he planned to exchange in the Levant for the goods recorded above: spices and silks, jewels and minerals. On 27 June 1457, Sturmy wrote his will. In June 1457, his ships were fitted out in Bristol. On 6 September 1457, Richard Benneyth

with force and arms, namely swords, staves and knives, assaulted the same Robert in Bristol and beat, wounded and maimed him so that his life was despaired of, and arrested a certain ship of Robert's called the *Katerine* moored there and then kept that ship under arrest there for ten days following, for which reason the same Robert could not sail overseas with his goods in that ship, to the said Robert's loss of £200.³³

Sturmy's Route

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Richard Benneyth was convicted, damages were awarded, and Sturmy left for his final voyage. The exact date of his departure is uncertain: he had definitely left before 19 April 1458, as on that date he is represented in absentia at the session of the King's Bench by his attorney John Beelle.³⁴

Sturmy's Route

On his 1458 voyage, Sturmy travelled through Pisa, Naples, Rhodes, and Chios. The island of Chios was a Genoese trading settlement, off the coast of modern-day Turkey. It is likely that Sturmy bought the majority of his Syrian and Mediterranean goods from Chian marketplaces – as suggested by his purchase of alum. According to the terms of the Genoese monopoly, this mineral could only be bought at Chios.

Crusader Acre had been the main overseas Genoese trading base. After the Mamlūk Empire steadily took each one of the Christian states, the European settlers established trading-post settlements around the edges of the former territories, in order to maintain their trading connections.³⁵ The Genoese established settlements around the Aegean coast – turning to trade on the island of Chios in response to the collapse of the Christian crusader states. To a medieval European traveller, the island of Chios was tantalisingly proximate to the Holy Land. The groves of mastic trees wept a healing gum which was only available on this island. The Chian landscape, marketplaces, and Genoese fortifications could be read as reminders of the Christian presence in Greater Syria. At the north of the island a thirteenth/fourteenth-century church in the mountains marks the devotional site of the Agio Gala caves – ‘agio gala’ meaning milk, in recognition of the milky fluid which runs down from the stalactites, as though from the Virgin's breasts. Visiting Chios allowed medieval Europeans to come close to an imaginative and transactional experience of the Holy Land, via the island fantasies of the Genoese-run settlement. The marketplaces from which Sturmy's goods were bought were established through the desire for surrogate territories.

In the fifteenth century, Chios was the site of a major slave market: although Sturmy was not trafficking people, he bought his goods from a centre of the medieval slave trade. Hannah Barker has described the existence of a common culture of slavery between Christian and Muslim groups across the medieval Mediterranean, dominated by Genoese, Venetian, and Mamlūk states.³⁶ Slavery was fundamental to Mamlūk society: *mamlūk* literally translates as the term for a male slave. The Mamlūk rulers were freedmen, and their governance was upheld by

a continued system of military and domestic slavery.³⁷ When the Burgundian traveller Bertrandon de la Brocquière (c. 1400–1459) came to Damascus he 'saw also, in a market-house, a lamentable sight – a public sale of Christians for slaves, both men and women' – and 'witnessed at Damascus the sale of a young black girl of not more than fifteen or sixteen years of age'.³⁸ In his account the child was brought along the streets nearly naked – a traumatic scene, recalled in grief. Sturmy and Heyton would have been witnesses to the trade in Chios – but their reaction goes unrecorded, and their investment in these networks was undeterred. On other ships the commodities which Sturmy bought did travel alongside enslaved people: in 1445, the Italian merchant Ieronimus Catanus arrived in Genoa, logging a cargo of thirty-six slaves, together with alum, cotton, rice, sugar, pepper, and ginger.³⁹ Looking past violence and exploitation towards his dream of profit, Sturmy came away from Chios with his cargo.

Chios was conquered by a Genoese joint-stock company in 1346. The Genoese settlers established a monopoly controlling the sale of the alum which they mined in Phokaia – modern-day Foça, on the Aegean coast, just across the sea, close enough to be visible from the shore.⁴⁰ And it was one of the investors in this settlement who observed and wanted to put a stop to Sturmy's venture.

The Pirate Gattiluso

Having traded in Chios, Sturmy went onwards to Crete, and started his return voyage from Heraklion in May 1458. He had been sailing home for less than a month when Gattiluso began his attack. Born on the island of Mitilini to a Genoese father and Greek mother, Giuliano Gattiluso was a member of an estranged branch of the powerful Gattiluso family. The Gattiluso lordships extended across Genoese territories. The family attempted to distance themselves from association with Giuliano as the reports of his piracy spread. In 1458, Gattiluso was at the height of his piratical career, active in the Mediterranean since 1450.⁴¹ He had invested his wealth in a number of alum mines in Phokaia – and was the principal of the Maona di Scio, the association of Italian investors who managed the tax revenues from the island of Chios.⁴² Sturmy's trip to Chios had drawn Gattiluso's attention – the goods on his ships seemed to be a threat, that amount of alum travelling back to England in a Bristolian cargo might be a challenge to Gattiluso's own profit network. As an investor and accountant, Gattiluso calculated that violence was the best solution to the potential disruption to the market. At the end of the battle this bureaucratic pirate was left with one less competitor.

Cargo Recollected

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Cargo Recollected

In this book, I have gathered together Sturmy's dispersed cargo in one place for the first time since the fateful attack of June 1458. I do not aim to reconstruct Sturmy's biography, identity, or intentions more than I have done already. The complex questions of premodern identity and power which Sturmy's voyage raises, however, will recur throughout the course of the book. The international reaction to Sturmy's failure shows the status of these objects in medieval economic and political spheres. These goods were desired by merchants, pirates, pilgrims, tailors, translators, doctors, knights, mystics, cooks, taverners, bookmakers, silk-women, alchemists, dyers, illuminators, poets, priests, and lovers.

Although other objects like those catalogued on Sturmy's ship did reach England, the inventory with which I begin is a list of absent goods. I take the loss of these artefacts as a starting point. Sturmy's cargo did arrive in England, as a cargo of the mind. Following Sturmy's missing merchandise led me through collections of real and fantasised goods which were kept in unexpected places. These written records take medieval objects out of the museum cabinet and return them to the moment of their consumption, theft, and veneration, getting close to objects as they were moved, used, and contaminated. While Sturmy's ships were sold off two thousand miles away from English shores, the desire for Syria was here, being unpacked and resold.

Introduction: De Sire, the Origins of English Desire

In medieval England, *de Sire* meant ‘from Syria’ and sounded like longing. The word ‘desire’ had recently entered Middle English from the Old French *desirer*, deriving from the Latin *desidere*, originally meaning ‘from the stars’. These celestial and earthly regions were out of reach, transcendent: the origins of desire. The English yearning for Syrian commodities was a movement upwards, reaching out towards what was already travelling outwards. This was the impulse which motivated Sturmy’s voyage: all of the objects on his ships had once travelled *de Sire*. At the trials of the Genoese in 1458, Sturmy’s partner John Heyton was a key witness, as were other survivors. Heyton submitted an inventory of their lost cargo, as evidence for the prosecution. These are the goods which were kept on Sturmy’s lost ships:

swete wyne as Tyer and Malvesies . . .
 alome foile and roche . . .
 dyvers spices . . .
 bowstavys . . .
 carpetys . . .
 grete chestes and coffers and mo stuffid with clothes of silke . . .
 purses, rynges and presious stonys . . .
 coyne and plate . . .
 mennes clothyng . . .
 Summa totalis of the seid 2 shippes with thapparailles, merchaundises
 and goodes as is aforesaid . . . £18,166 13s 4d.¹

Labelled as Syrian in English marketplaces and imaginations, these goods gained commercial and spiritual credibility. Their value increased through association with the global marketplaces and sacred sites of Mamlūk Syria. These origins were sometimes real and sometimes fictive: ‘Syriana’ sold alongside authentic products. The objects on Sturmy’s ship were gone by the time Heyton recorded them. But other ships did manage to bring these goods to medieval England – as well as bring the English to Syria.