

A CATALAN CONTRIBUTION TO INTERNATIONAL LAW: THE CONSULATE OF THE SEAS

Cover page of one of the earliest Catalan editions of the Book of the Consulate of the Seas



At the beginning of the 13th century, the development of maritime trade was one of the bases of the growth of the Catalan economy and its political influence on both shores of the Mediterranean. A dense network of sea routes was developed from Barcelona to Algiers and Tripoli, passing through Marseille, Genoa, Sardinia, Pisa, Sicily, Naples and Venice, to Damascus,

Constantinople, Alexandria and Cyprus. This network of sea routes was reinforced with a 'Northern' one connecting Barcelona with Bruges and from there to the Hanseatic cities. The increasing complexity of this commercial activity, as well as the important investments and profits linked to it, demanded a set of rules to regulate it

and to provide a degree of security to a potentially volatile business.

The *Consolat de Mar* or Consulate of the Seas was one of the earliest institutions to deal with these practices. It was established in Barcelona between 1260 and 1282, and developed a series of ordinances and customs that became codified in the *Llibre del Consolat de Mar* or the Book of the Consulate of the Seas around 1350. This dealt with the rights to boats, sea routes, harbours, the salaries of sailors, insurance, shipwrecks, relations between merchants and shipowners, and so on, becoming the first comprehensive set of norms regulating all aspects related to maritime trade issues.

Thanks to the major presence of Catalan trade throughout the whole Mediterranean, these juridical norms that were originally created to regulate Catalan maritime commercial activity became progressively implemented as *ius mercatorum* in a large part of the *Mare Nostrum*, and later on in the



Atlantic. They therefore went on to become one of the bases of International Maritime Law.

In another field of study, the importance of the Catalan maritime trade of the time was also reflected in the enormous improvement in cartographic science. Of special interest is the Cartographic School of Majorca which focused on the Mediterranean and was mostly made up of Jewish scholars and which is considered to be one of the finest of the pre-Modern era.

With the arrival of the printing press, the Consulate of the Seas was

first published in its original language, Catalan, in the city of Valencia in 1487, followed by dozens of new editions in the same language over the next two hundred years. Moreover, following its spread to other territories as 'good practices' it was subsequently translated into Spanish, French, Italian (with several early Venetian editions), German, Dutch and English.

The Consulate of the Seas was in force in Barcelona until 1829, when it was replaced by the Spanish Trade Code, a new set of rules inspired by the French legislation of Napoleonic origin.

Mediterranean section of the Catalan Atlas by Abraham Cresques, Majorca, c. 1375.