

Michel Mollat Du Jourdin

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Michel Mollat died shortly before Christmas 1996. In him the *Istituto Datini* has lost not merely one of the oldest members of its Scientific Committee - of which he was a founder-member in 1967 - but one of its most loyal and active members. And all of us have lost a guide, a counsellor and a friend.

Michel Mollat's career was exemplary for many reasons. After studying in Nantes, in Rennes and in Paris, he taught in high schools from 1937 to 1947. Mollat went back to university as a research assistant in Paris from 1947 to 1948. He was a lecturer at the University of Besançon from 1948 to 1950, and Professor of Medieval History at the University of Lille from 1950 until 1958 when he was appointed Professor at the Sorbonne where he remained until his retirement in 1979.

He was also Director of Studies in the Maritime History Department at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* (IVth section). He was an active member of many scientific institutes in France and abroad, and was Chairman of the *Société d'histoire de France*, the *Société d'histoire religieuse de France*, and the International Maritime History Committee. He was a member of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1978) and of the *Académie de Marine*. He was invited to many academies in Portugal, Spain, Belgium and the United States as a tribute to his work.

Mollat's research is all concerned with the history of the last centuries of the Middle Ages but covers many aspects of that period. His thesis for his doctorate, published in 1952, was entitled *Le commerce maritime normand à la fin du Moyen Age*. After this masterful work, three main themes may be seen in Mollat's research. One is the spirit of enterprise in the fifteenth century, as seen in Jacques Coeur: Mollat published the famous inquest into his affairs when he was condemned in 1453 (2 volumes, 1952 - 1953). Later, in 1988, Mollat published a biography of Jacques Coeur. Another area of research concerns social history and, more precisely, the history of the poor: for years Mollat organised a seminar on this delicate subject, and he collected the papers under the title *Etudes sur l'histoire de la pauvreté (Moyen Age - XVIe siècle)* 2 volumes, (1974) and wrote a synthesis, *Les pauvres au Moyen Age* (1978). The third theme in Mollat's research is maritime history, and is the one that took him the furthest, both literally and metaphorically. He organised and directed countless seminars on maritime history, researching into technical development, without neglecting

its economic aspects (trade), its social aspects (seafarers), and its cultural aspects (the clash of civilisations). Long years of research and a great love of the sea resulted in Michel Mollat's last large publication, *L'Europe et la mer* (1993), which appeared simultaneously in five languages.

Michel Mollat was a distinguished-looking man with a profound Christian faith. His small stature, his frail form, so familiar to the delegates at the *Settimane* in Prato or at many other conferences and seminars, housed unrivalled knowledge, brilliance and strength of intellect. His cheerfulness was genuine most of the time. Generous and permanently curious, Mollat had the temperament of a vagabond both in time and space. A gentleman by birth and by nature, he was not at all prejudiced but he fiercely condemned inconsistency, arrogance and vanity. His indignant outbursts were vehement, and his politeness and, above all, his modesty were exemplary. Michel Mollat sailed right on course, all the way into harbour, sure of his compass and his portulans, with the wind always astern. He never allowed himself to be lured off course by ideological sirens, from which his Christian convictions protected him. He was none the less open to new ideas. Although not at the centre of the team of the *Annales*, he played a very active part in what has been called New History (for which he would not have used capital letters: it was natural for him).

Michel Mollat was among the most magnificent of men. He will remain so in our memory: a master and a friend.