Mercanti all’estero: modelli di cultura mercantile a confronto tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna

Gli studi più recenti convergono nell’indicare che tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna il trasferimento in altre città dei mercanti determinò profondi cambiamenti dal punto di vista economico, politico e istituzionale, ma anche sociale, culturale e urbanistico. Un aspetto relativamente poco indagato, ma di particolare interesse, riguarda gli importanti riflessi che l’arrivo di questa particolare categoria di stranieri nelle città europee provocò sulle pratiche, i comportamenti, i modelli, gli strumenti e l’organizzazione degli uomini d’affari.

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Owing to its geopolitical position, Dubrovnik usually functioned as a link between mercantile cultures of Italy, the Eastern Adriatic, the Slavic hinterland, and the Levant. Before the 13th century, the city was rather autonomous in developing its municipal economy while acknowledging the central authority of the Byzantine emperor, Venice, or briefly the Normans of South Italy. Dubrovnik also managed to develop strong trade contacts with Byzantium and through it with the distant overseas. The strongest economic ties in the 12th century were those with the cities of the Eastern Adriatic and the Italian peninsula, with which Dubrovnik had numerous trade contracts. In the 12th century, the city also had trade agreements with the hinterland. All these ties continued to be active into the 13th century. The Fourth Crusade turned Venice into the leading power in the Mediterranean. This was the time when Dubrovnik fell under its sovereignty more durably (until 1358) and became the Serenissima’s key post in the southern Adriatic. The last local count of Dubrovnik, Damian Juda, tried to preserve the city’s autonomy, but the opposing clan used the Venetian aspirations to regain its ruling position by accepting a Venetian count. Venice did not colonize Dubrovnik, sending only a count and his assistants, and some troops when necessary. These counts and assistants nevertheless exerted a strong influence on Dubrovnik’s administration, law, and the organization of urban space, which defined the economy and merchantile culture as well. The new circumstances were a powerful magnet for artisans, merchants, and investors from Italy (especially Venice), who came to Dubrovnik either to stay or only temporarily, on business.

Members of various patrician families from Venice were involved in Dubrovnik’s economy (largely in real-estate business and financial operations, but also in long-distant trade) even if they came only occasionally to the city. It was not accidentally that some of these families also gave the counts of Dubrovnik. The officeholding there would be very beneficial for Venetian noblemen, and they could mix business with politics. Individual counts ruled only briefly – two years on the average, which was hardly sufficient to become acquainted with the complexities of the local political or economic situation. Therefore some of them returned to the office later on, such as Johannes Dandolo or Marino Badoero. Sometimes other members of the same family came to occupy the position. Thus, during the 13th century, the count’s office in Dubrovnik was largely occupied by a few families: Querini; Dandolo; Zorzi/Georgio, who had a hereditary county in Korčula; Iustinian/Giustinian, Tiepolo (doge’s sons); Morosini/Mauroceno, Contarini/Contarono. Members of patrician families must have used their sojourn in Dubrovnik for climbing the career ladder: the sources allow us to follow them as they occupied various state posts in Venetian territory. Some families counted on the countship for their financial security, using their position to pursue the private commercial interests of their families in a particular area, where their relatives invested money. We find some of them, before their countship in Dubrovnik, previously being the sedentary merchants in the colleganzas, investing in the long distance trade from Venice to the Levant. Nevertheless, counts from patrician families primarily applied measures directed from the centre, since they were accountable to the Council of Venice.

Trade between Dubrovnik and Venice must have been active early in the 13th century. The scarce documents mention merchants from Dubrovnik in Venice as well as loan contracts
between some citizens of and their Venetian creditors Dubrovnik. Throughout the 13th century buyers from Dubrovnik purchased galleys, fabrics, hardware, and various other commodities in Venice. As for the relations between Dubrovnik and other Italian cities, some trade contracts were renewed during the first half of the 13th century, but mainly with cities in Apulia, which was not in the direct interest sphere of Venice (south of the Ancona-Dubrovnik line), or during the Ragusan rebellions. The Venetians took various measures to strengthen their dominance over trade in the Adriatic, and merchants from Dubrovnik had to adhere to the Venetian regulations in seafaring and trade, and were forbidden to trade with Venetian enemies. Besides, considerable capital was drawn from the city on an annual basis. Even though no document from 1205 has been preserved that would give clues about the conditions of Dubrovnik’s surrender, later contracts allow us to conclude that a tribute of ca. 300-400 librae was paid annually.

The commune of Dubrovnik and the local nobility (the group around Damian Juda) sought to resist the aspirations of Venice to control their trade and seafaring. In 1226, Dubrovnik exiled count Giovanni Querini, and Venice responded with restrictions at once: the property of Dubrovnik’s citizens in Venice was confiscated and the Venetians were forbidden to take Ragusan tenants or to trade with them. The doge also sent a warning to Dubrovnik upon hearing that the city had established trade contacts with the Omiš pirates. Venice also demanded hostages (members of Juda’s clan) in order to secure obedience. Conflicts with Venice reached another pinnacle in 1231 and 1235, during which the local nobility signed some trade contracts (with the Bulgarian emperor Ivan Asen in 1230, with the cities of Recanati, Ferrara, and Fano in 1231, with Omiš pirates and Rimini in 1235). Each time Venice responded with restrictions. Having suppressed the (last) rebellion in 1252, Venice imposed a customs tax that limited Dubrovnik’s trade, while the Venetian merchants were exempted from these limitations.

At the times of crisis (after Ragusan rebellions), Venice sent governors with military experience, e.g. from the unstable areas of Syria and Euboea. Their military experience was important also in the defence of the city: in the 13th century, Serbia became very powerful under the rule of Uroš I, and the king tried to conquer Dubrovnik several times.

The circulation of counts offices must have resulted in knowledge transfer and experience exchange. Their role in the spatial organisation of the suburb and the construction of the walls around it during the 50s is probable (count Marsilio Zorzi had such impact on the urban planning of Korčula). The counts also used their previous experience to regulate the diplomatic relations to stabilize the hinterland: it was the period of the growing exploitation of noble metals in the area (with Brskovo as the most valuable ore mine). Textile products were a very important item in Dubrovnik’s export trade towards Bosnia and Serbia. In the 13th century, there are only sporadic data on fabrics. Venetians were exempted from the customs tax when buying slaves from the Slavs or goods from the Kotorans in Dubrovnik They also participated in the export of leather and wooden planks from the hinterland.

Merchants from Italy and other Mediterranean and Adriatic centres traded on Dubrovnik’s slave market (mostly buying female slaves from Bosnia and Hum for domestic service). It is known that some merchants came from Acre to Dubrovnik in order to buy slaves, perhaps also metal needed to produce weapons. A network of contacts in Syria could help some Venetian families get involved in overseas trade. in 1274, the sources mention a bailo in Dubrovnik who continued his journey from there. In 1281, when Venice prohibited its subjects to export wood and iron to the overseas regions, Akkon and Tyre were exempted from this ban, and so were Dubrovnik and Zadar. Dubrovnik was obviously a crucial point on the Levantine route.

Mid 70s and early 80s is the period of stable relations with the hinterland, during the rule of Serbian king from Stefan Dragutin (and first years of rule of Stefan Uroš II). This was a
period of immediate growth in export. After 1282, an increasing number of Venetians in Dubrovnik were involved in monetary business and granted large loans. According to a study by I. Voje, the loans granted by the Venetians in Dubrovnik rose in 1282 to more than 8000 pp and brought at least 1600 pp of interest. Other creditors were businessmen from Kotor, Bar, Ulcinj, and Korčula and local noblemen to a somewhat lesser number. Their debtors were primarily commoners: various artisans (blacksmiths, drapers, tanners). In 1282 the Book of Debit Notes (Debita notariae) was started by the first official notary and chancellor in Dubrovnik, Tomasino de Savere (even though the oldest notarial records date from 1278). Artisans who had no starting capital had to take loans or collegantia, in which the creditor did not take part in trade transactions. In the late 70s the societates are mentioned in the Ragusan documents, as well as the entegae and the roganciae. The Venetian law influenced these relations to a considerable extent, even though some elements were inherited from the Byzantine law and the local custom law.

Changes in law, literacy, and generally in mercantile culture during the 13th c. occurred largely under the influence of Venetian counts, their assistants and municipal officials, who were also of Italian origin. In 1237, the count of Dubrovnik was Giovanni Tiepolo, son of Doge Giacomo, famous for his legislative activity. It is believed that the first larger legislative section in the Statute of Dubrovnik was conceived during Tiepolo’s governance. In 1272, count Marco Iustiniano had the Liber statutorum civitatis Ragusii codified. Even though it bears a stamp of Venetian governance it also had a stamp of European law and the common law (including the norms valid in the world of trade – lex mercatoria). Already in 1274, the Major Council of Venice allowed count Pietro Tiepolo to take foreigners as assistants, as well as a notary. From this point, it is possible to follow various financial innovations – linked to temporary transactions and those of small value, loans, etc. – which are a direct consequence of economic activities, increased safety, market growth, as well as the impact of legal and trade culture brought from the Italian peninsula.

In 1277, count Marco Iustiniano codified the Liber statutorum doane Ragusii, which defined the regulations on customs taxes and excise duties in the commune of Dubrovnik. The Venetians are here not listed as foreigners as they were considered to be full-fledged citizens. The same year of 1277 the first official notary and chancellor Tomasino de Savere came to Dubrovnik and started the official notarial records.

The increased need of administration and loans must also be viewed in the context of demography and urban development. The chronicles mention 1269, 1277, and 1279 as the year of intense influx of population, especially from the hinterland, but also from the Eastern Adriatic and the Italian peninsula. Intense economic and demographic development of Dubrovnik in the 13th century resulted in an increased need of housing and a rise in land prices – especially in the suburbs. According to the Statute of 1272, a network of streets was created at this time, running through the southern suburb, after which the areas along the new communication lines were partitioned in building plots and sublet to those who were interested in building houses. The same model of using space was applied to the communal territory north of Placa. The suburb was a new, attractive zone of economic activity, and the administrative and political centre of the commune gradually moved towards the north in the course of the 13th century. Communal lands were first sublet as early as 1277 (recorded in the Statute of the Customs Office). However, data on renting communal or private land are systematically present in the notarial records from 1282 onwards (time of the economic boom and the countship of Nicola Morosini), and so are other data on communal land plots (the Book of Communal Real Estate from 1286 includes a list from 1282 with names of the owners of some 170 wooden cottages situated on communal land, mostly artisans). The Book of Communal Real Estate was introduced in by Aço quondam Jacobi de Titulo who came to Dubrovnik as the secretary of the count Mihael Morosini.
A considerable number of artisans from various Italian cities lived in the new suburbs, connected among themselves as well as with the local professionals of the same type. Among the Italian newcomers one can observe a prevalence of Venetians. Italian merchants and artisans were attracted by specific needs (specialized crafts) or by profit. Thus, there were Venetians among the carders, tinkers, and armourers.

Here I will only mention one group of tanners/furriers of Italian (mostly Venetian) origin, who were involved in the production of, and trade with leather and fur. Master Petar pilicarius from Venice and his wife Maria had a son and a daughter, Martin and Benvenuta. Benvenuta was married to furrier Albert, son of master Henrik, a blacksmith from Vicenza – thus moving to a family of similar origins after marriage. Henrik obtained one half of a wooden cottage on communal land from his mother-in-law as dowry – next to it, there was a land plot rented by Benvenuta’s brother Martin. Martin was in professional relations with the Venetians (for instance he took Petar Menegati from Venice as an apprentice), but he married a local girl, niece of a wealthy creditor and furrier master Kraniša. As a dowry he obtained one half of a wooden cottage in the southern burgus as dowry. Also, this marriage brought him connections to the local professionals of the same type. Similarly, in 1282 Antonio Pigocio, a furrier (and petty creditor) from Venice, received a house in pledge from his father-in-law, the local nobleman Luka de Mica. In 1283, Venetian Donatus Carnavalis received one half of a wooden cottage as dowry upon marrying Maria, daughter of the local nobleman Fusko de Valerico. It may be concluded that the Venetians (men) liked to marry local girls from the families involved in the same trade, since it brought them real estate as well as professional connections.

Besides marital ties, there were business contracts involving both foreign and local artisans, including those from various Eastern Adriatic cities: thus, in 1283 peliparius Jacobus de Papio from Venice received in collegantia 10 perpers from Gervasius from Trogir. His son, furrier Marco from Venice, had collegantia with a local tanner, Grupsa, just like his father. He used his Venetian connections to trade in leather, which he acquired through the local merchants in Brskovo. The “local” Venetians bought agricultural products such as meat or skins in the hinterland of Dubrovnik and then traded them from Dubrovnik around the Mediterranean. Thus, in 1283 the aforementioned furrier Antonio Pigocio made an agreement with two Venetians, Johannes Balduinus and Petrus Longus, over the export of 25 lambskins to Constantinople. Antonio occasionally obtained the capital needed to buy the skins from loans – it is recorded that in 1282 he took and paid back a loan of 77 sdg from Matheus, a nobleman of Dubrovnik, son of Paskal de Benissa. He used the profit to become a creditor himself. Artisans and merchants from various Italian cities played a significant role in urban economy. They were connected with each other as well as the local professionals of the same trade.

In 1296, during the countship of Marino Morosini (the son of Angelus, who was count of Rab), the Great Fire devastated the urban texture in the suburb, which allowed for new and modern urban planning with the so-called “double rows”. It was the latest form of spatial organization at the time, which possibly emerged under a Venetian influence or came from other Italian cities (through the count, his assistants, or the notary). It was the commoners, largely artisans, who were interested in this form of land plots – all equal in value, positioned along the streets (suitable for shops or workshops), and not necessarily in their ownership (as they often did not have the status of citizens). Many took loans in order to buy a cottage and pay the rent for urban land and thus Venetian investors and creditors were often involved, also in case of confiscation resulting from unpaid debts. Since the Venetian creditors were occasionally absent from the city, their affairs were taken care of by local fiduciaries (members of Dubrovnik’s nobility). The economic crisis that struck the city at the turn of the 14th century (with very unstable hinterland) had a negative impact on
loan trade: at the time when some impoverished noble families were forced to sell their estates in the city, the intermediaries were mostly Venetians with sizeable capital, such as Paulo Quirino, Leonardus Bonvicinus de Veneciis, or Simone Leoni. The economic growth of Dubrovnik must be viewed in the context of all these demographic, political, and social circumstances, and in regard to the local population in majority. However, artisans and merchants from Italian cities together with Venetian officials transferred many commercial practices and culture from their homeland (communication, services, spatial and social networking) and strongly influenced the shaping of the city in the 13th c.