

The Tuscan Merchant Figure in Andalucía in the 15th and 16th century

In the 15th century the Europeans exceeded the confines of the known-world that had always contained its history. In a few decades the promises were created to maintain ever stronger commercial relations with Asia and Africa. The kingdom of Portugal opened a passage to the Atlantic adventures by colonizing Madeira and the Azores, which it later used to travel further south Africa to search for gold, slaves and ivory. However the true revolution with global repercussions was Columbus' intrepid adventure in April 1492, as it opened unimaginable prospects and created the basis for great imperial colonization. Within this singular and unique historic mark, a group of men emigrated from their country to these centers and established base for further commerce. For a period of expansion that lasted almost one and a half centuries, three generations of merchants with an expansionist and innovative mentality were present to make profits, and the choices and the conquests of that marked were the result of correct and rational decisions.

THE FIRST GENERATION: FROM 1421 TO 1485

It is important to point out that during that first period in the Spanish land, in Seville didn't exist an important Florentine community. The people of this -period that appeared and disappeared from documents found after the year 1421, come and wend from Florence, Lisbon and Valencia. They stayed in town just sufficient time to complete negotiations. This first generation didn't leave roots nor try to integrate into the sevillan social life. For example, Giovanni de' Bardi, at the service of the Medici family, was declared a trades in Lisbon and Seville, and even though he had a vineyard he didn't spend much time in the city. Furthermore, the Tedaldi family, at the service of another important Florentine family - the Strozzi - visited the city only when the opportunity to import grain arose. The Genovese merchants penetrated the depths of Andalucía, whereas the Florentine's managed to enter the Court of Catholic King to supply textiles and wool, therefore achieving an important position. From Tuscany, as well as the Florentines, the Pisanos also came, some of gaining the title of "Alguacil" - meaning a civil servant of the Spanish administration.

Along with companies, there were also merchants that worked for themselves. For example in Cordoba, some Florentine merchants lived who traded wool and silk. Although the Arabs were still in the territory trading those materials, the Florentine workers were in demand for their high level of specialization, and the textiles that came from Florence always found a good market. In the city there also were artisans willing to learn new skills, as a young man called Giovanni worked as a carpenter in Pietro Díaz de Écija workshop in 1475. Or two watchmakers, Simone and Francesco Rossi, who took advantage of the new demand for clock towers to find work. In Florence a precious clock has shone in the Arnolfo tower of the Palazzo Vecchio since 1354.

BUSINESS IN SEVILLE

Since 1492 Américo Vespucci has developed the role of reviser and administrator of the bank agency belonging to the Medici family in Seville. Some decades ago this strong family had started commerce in the Iberian Peninsula, but the accounts were not clearly administrated.

When Vespucci settled himself in this city, the political situation in Spain was very unsettled: the Reconquest was close to its end and both Malaga and Cordoba belonged to the Castilian Kingdom and the incorporation of Granada was eminent. Following the instructions received, Amerigo investigated the financial situation of Giannozzo Berardi, the most important Florentine merchant in Andalucía. He was a provider of slaves from Africa and an expert in armament and naval supply of the expeditions of navigators. Amerigo would enter the society as Procurator and who would become his closest friend. This society, which would persist until the death of Berardi in 1495, took part in the armament of Columbus' journey to the New World. Berardi, in this sense, was the intermediate of the friendship between Amerigo y Columbus. In fact, in June 1496 when Columbus came back to Cadiz from his second journey, he liquidated all the accounts of the company which were still pending with Vespucci.

With the liquidation of Berardi's company, the system of hereditary followed by the Florentines in their commercial houses in Spain becomes very clear. These merchant societies apply a simple rule which one definitely excludes the sons or the closest parents of the shareholders from the continuation of the business, contrary to normal practice in Genoa's society. For the Florentines, in all the cases we have studied, the procurator always replaces the dead chief.

The differences between the Genoa and Florentine compatriots increase if we consider that they arrived to Spain through small individual companies and maintained a close union with their families and societies in their country. On the other hand all Florentines operated through autonomous companies, but belonged to a circle of companies that are similar to the current holdings. In other words, a company that has enough participation share in another company could control its management. Instead, at the end of the 15th century Florentines started to use what we currently call a *limited partnership business entity*: a society with two categories of shareholders: limited partners whose liability is restricted to their fixed contributions to the partnership and general partners whose liability is unrestricted. They changed towards this kind of company because they permitted to extend the liability to other businessmen to raise their capitals: "*El señor Jacome Botti, mi hermano [...] fue a Calis el año 1519 con los dineros de todos nos otros hermanos, para tratar por todos juntos en comun y tanto partiçipava l'uno como l'otro*", ("Mr. Jacome Botti, my brother [...] was in Cadiz in 1519 with all of our money to do business for all of us together and one participated as another"). It was October 4th 1562 and this was how Giovambattista Botti summed up forty years of familiar and economic activity.

The commercial companies, respecting the Florentine tradition, were also a school of technical education for young men that learned in the workshops the first notions of calculations, how to keep account books and how to control business correspondence. In the end, a school to face up to the art of market. The school of education wasn't easy at all, and among all documents conserved in the *Archivio di Stato di Firenze*, we found some advice that were given to the handler, in which stand out pragmatism, an appropriate professional preparation and sense of honor identified with business prosperity. In other words, the Tuscan merchant's quality and values in the sunset of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

“Ricordati che metta il capo alle faccende [...] altrimenti [...] ti troveresti senpre gharzone, però non volere volare senza l’ale che non ti riuscirà, fa l’ale sode et buone e poi potrai volare quanto vorrai e non si fanno [l’ale] se non con la sollecitudine [...]. Legha le voglie et buttale in mare et cerca di avanzare” (“Remember that he concentrates on his job [...] in another way [...] he will always be a handler. But don’t fly without wings, because you will not achieve it; make strong wings and then you can fly as much as you want. And you can forge wings only with determination [...]. Tie your vices and throw them into the sea and try to improve”).

THE SECOND GENERATION: AFTER 1485

The Berardi family (from the Santa María Novella quarter) was the first family to decide to stay in the city. They came from Lisbon and were introduced to the local society by Bartolomé Marchioni, a Florentine merchant who came from Lisbon as well. Another family arrived to the neighborhood, the Capponis, who came directly from Florence. Finally, a larger group of families arrived in Seville by the end of the century: the Rondinellis (from the San Giovanni quarter) and the Fantonis, among others.

This generation of immigrants was characterized by their tendency to return to their country even after long stays; only in a few occasions they would stay permanently.

In Castilian trade fairs the Florentine presence was always important. Unfortunately, little documentation is left in the Spanish archives; therefore it is very difficult to trace their movements. However, enough data has been retrieved to affirm that Florentine merchants not only wrote down their contracts, but also in many occasions sent them to Florence in order to keep record of their agreements.

Seville at that time, especially the Triana quarter frequented by sailors, was a significant centre which served as a base for commerce with Africa and England. Florentine merchants worked in the city as well as in the region (Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Puerto de Santa María y Cádiz). Wool was the most traded merchandise, together with silk, brocades, damasks, velvet, wood and tuna fish. They were also in charge of renting ships for the transportation of alum salt, which was necessary for tanning leather and fixing the colors on fabrics. After 1453, when Constantinople was taken by the Turkish, only small amounts of the precious salt arrived to Europe, since it came from Asia. The control of alum in Italy depended on Florence, because Florentine artisans and dyers were the most appreciated.

The first characteristic that unite almost all the emigrants that arrived to Seville after Colón (1485) is the absence of roots in the Spanish city. At that time, there were different ways that a migrant could achieve a prestigious social and economic level: the first step that they had to take was to register in “los Reinos de España” (the Kingdoms of Spain), as it was called at that time, and as the Ridolfis as the Berardis or the Vespucci requested and got their documents. Another possibility was to possess the “Carta de Hidalguía” (Letter of Nobility), a nobility title that allows people to save money, because it exempted the paying of some taxes, and it recognized a social level. The documents found in the archives prove only Giannozzo Berardi attained it, the chief of the Medici family in Seville. In 1507 Francesco de’ Bardi tried to buy the title of treasurer, but at the end a Sevillian was awarded it. The only Florentine that achieved an important position, except Amerigo Vespucci, was Francesco Buonaguasi, who in 1486 was appointed “Corregidor” (Mayor) of Puerto Real, the first harbor on the Atlantic ocean created by Catholic monarchs.

Regarding weddings, the Italians that stayed in Seville almost always respected the rules: the Genoveses maintained close relations with their families in the homeland and got married only with Genovese women or daughters of women that lived in Andalucía. Instead the Florentines preferred the Sevillian women. And the ones that were widows normally didn't get married again. They only had relatively stable relations and took care of their partner's children.

In any case, the wedding was quite important when someone decided to get married in Spain. To get married meant to undertake the family of the woman and that was like opening the door to a lot of conflicts of interest. The Merchant families that had been in their homeland considered it unwise to mix up their patrimony with those of the foreigners: "*Non mi piacerebbe punto, perché cotesti cavalieri andolusi non sono buoni ad altro se non a tenere molte fantasie*" ("I didn't like it at all, because those Andalusian gentlemen only had a lot of fantasies"). So in these occasions they worried about keeping the capitals invested in Spain separated from the other possessed in Tuscany. Furthermore, the weddings produced tax purposes and the merchants had to pay taxes on the dowry of the woman to the council of their city. The only solution was "*di non havere voi qua cosa che vi se ni possi levare*" ("not to have anything that they can take away"). If the everyday life of those men wasn't easy, the situation completely changed with the new generation that would be in the city after 1506-1510, when the trades with the Indies started to bear fruit.

Thereafter, Florentines arrived from everywhere. Some came directly from Florence to conclude some business, although later and for other reasons they stayed in Seville - as what happened to Vespucci. Other merchants, for example the Verdi brothers (from the San Giovanni quarter), arrived from Castilla, went to live in Cádiz before settling in Seville.

THE 3RD GENERATION: AFTER 1506-1510

At the start of the 16th century the families that we have the most information about are the Peri, Bernardini, Gondi, Bonomo, Botti and the Lapi families, the latter in close relation with the Strozzi. It's also important to emphasize that many of them came to Spain continuing a family tradition, as come documents conserved in Fondo Diplomatico Mediceo demonstrate. Following a very common rule between the immigrants, they hardly ever arrived alone and when business started to increase they called all their family: "*Fare le facciende in nome tuo e di Batista e di qui a un anno potremo mandarvi Francesco*" ("Do business in the name of Batista and yourself, in a few years we'll send you Francesco"). All the components of the Italian community in Seville, for example the Berardi, Rufaldi, Verde and the Colón families lived in simple houses in the "calle Francos" zone, near the Cathedral. Only the Rondinelli brothers possessed their own house. From their rental contracts we know that they paid a small amount, and that shows their modest condition. Only the Bardi family in 1506 managed to purchase a farm in San Juan se Aznalfarache, a small town a few kilometers from the city.

Although in different times all of them managed to reach a privileged situation. Following the long navigational routes transported all kinds of merchandise: Oriental, European, African and American products, and also took part in the finance of journeys to unknown places. While the Europeans were first contact with new civilizations with unknown imported products, for example chocolate (1528) and tomato (1540). A privileged condition that they later lost, returning to a humble one. It is hard to understand how with all these favorable activities, they left such poor inheritances. This situation is comparable only with the

Colón administration - neither his children nor him dazzled in the art of the economy. Only the tax returns and their testaments of merchants or their wives demonstrate that at the end of their lives their economic possibilities were minimal and that the widows had to reduce their standard of living after the death of their husbands. Vespucci's wife lost her house while other widows were forced to sell their slaves or try to do business with the Indians. None of those men bought their graves and they were buried where their wives had a chapel.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURY GENERATIONS

The 16th century, differently from what happened in the previous century, the movement of men and Florentine families to Andalucía won't - in the majority of cases - the exodus of those who had left their lands in search of a better life. What brought them there were the economic possibilities where the attitude to take initiative and an expansionistic mentality: "*Et se in lo paese sono [...] da ffarvi buone incette [...] che noi avessimo [...] da ghuadangiare qualchosa*" ("And if in the town [...] there are business [...] from which we can [...] earn money"). The absence, however large, didn't have much influence on the strong relations with their land and also the smallest nucleus always acted on behalf of others or as business partners that maintained the central headquarters in Florence as a reference point to other societies and European cities.

If in the middle of the 15th century the Sevillian colony of the Florentine merchants was still relatively unpopulated and only the Medici family acted with intensity, at the beginning of the 16th century the situation had completely changed, and all the biggest families from the Capponi to the Gondi, from the Strozzi to the Ricasoli, moving on to the Ridolfi, Martelli, Gualderotti, Lapi, Fantoni, Del Vigna and the Botti families worked hard in the main cities of Andalucía. In the end, in a few decades the Florentine presence reached different levels and by between 1519-1566 a total of fourteen companies were present in the marked.

Clearly, compared with the youngest companies, the largest ones were stronger because they had more time to enter into a system of economic relations at a European level. Despite this, they strengthened the solidarity relations that united the components of the company. Far from their homeland, the antagonism between families was reduced and they shared purpose and economic vision. As we can read in some documents, the merchants offered hospitality, advice and assistance to compatriots that arrived to Spain for the first time: "*È venuto di Firenze Giovanni Carnesecchi [...] e, secondo intendo, è buono giovane im però vi si raccomanda*" ("Carnesecchi has arrived from Florence [...] and he seems to be a good person so we recommend him to you"). And also "*Viene costà [...] e come [...] non ha niuno che lo posa incaminare [...] mi ha fatto pregare [...] a voi et [...] siate contento consigliarlo et aiutarlo*" ("He arrives [...] and so [...] he doesn't have anyone to help him [...] he has made me beg you [...] you are happy to advise and help him").

We also have to recognize that the social and economic fabric of the region accepted the presence of the merchants without much protest because the Italian economic strength and the prestige of the merchants based on centuries of trade, this would have sparked protectionist reactions from the local merchants. Instead, the reactions came from high above and Charles V moved to protect his interests by ordering the seizure of the contents of the boats that came from the Indies, as we can read in some documents found in

the commercial books in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze: “*Qua si dice come il vostro Re à fatto sospendere il tesoro [...] venuto di India, così sendo sarà gran danno de’ mercanti*” (“Here they tell how your king has seized the treasure that came from Indias, in this way it will hurt the merchants”).

The period when the imperial politics was clearly against the Florentine’s was without doubt in 1529-1530, the years of the well-known siege of the city when the hostilities against the Emperor King Charles V became very hard.

In more than one occasion, the Florentine’s had their riches seized, and in fact in the commercial books we can read: “*Li poveri merchanti, quali ànno per le ghuerre tanto patito, non ànno cholpa nissuna di questi gharbugli*” (“The poor merchants, who have suffered a lot because of the wars, aren’t guilty of those shady deals”). The traffic with Italy, and most of all with Florence, became so dangerous that the merchants looked for ways to reduce the risk of seizure. They tried to obtain safe passage from the Emperor, without this they were advised “*non mandare nulla*” (“not to send anything”). Clearly too much care was never taken and the safest way was to possess your own boat. But it was forbidden for foreigners to buy boats so there weren’t any other possibilities but use boats from friendly countries that didn’t depend on the Empire: “*l’ avere una sua nave e fare d’ avere salvachondotto dal Re [...] e marinarla di gente non sospetta*” (“To possess your own boat and to have safe passage from the king [...] and fill the boat with trustworthy people”). In those years the position of all the Florentines married with Spanish women was never simple; as citizen of Florence they were enemies of the Emperor and as neighbors - or that is to say foreigners that lived for at least ten years and be married to Spanish wives - they were also from France: “*Te che hai donna spagnuola et perciò che sei come naturale di costì, che sono ragione grosse*” (“You, who has a Spanish wife and that’s why you are a neighbor, that is something important”).

A FLORENTINE MERCHANT FAMILY IN THE 16TH CENTURY

In the first half of the 16th century the Botti were present in the most important economic places of that period. They were a family of humble origin composed of the brothers Giovambattista, Iacopo and Matteo that raised more than they could have imagined. The absence of an organized and complete accountancy leaves an incomplete analysis of their business. What we know about them is that their holding developed companies with offices in Tuscany and in Spain. All of them achieved stable connections to the most important European places - London, Antwerp, Paris, Lion, Venice and Rome - with which they exchanged more than one hundred and fifty different goods: “*Piacciavi, quando potete avere [...] nuove [notizie] di l’ Indie, darmene aviso [...] che tengho certi amici dilli boni che ogni dì me ne dimandano*” (“If possible, when you have [...] new news from the Indias, let me know [...] because I have good friends that ask me about it every day”). In this way, together with sugar we also find newly discovered seeds from the continent, or the precious cochineal, a coloring taken from some female insects, now a day replaced by a synthetic coloring because of its high cost of production. Apart from that, they handled conserved fish, leathers, corn, woods, silks and anascote, a fabric of twill wood. All these products left the Spanish market to reach the Tuscan and Italian ones. Instead, from Florence and Pisa the brothers sent the best quality fabric. The Florentine tradition, in fact, imported raw material and exported the finished products.

But, despite of all these exchanges, as already said, it is impossible to carry out an exact estimation about the volume of the Botti family business', although from the paperwork we understand that it is considerable. At least the paperwork helps to explain how and when in those uncertain political and economic years the expectations due to the discovery of the Indies had influences on the choices of the merchants. The Botti brothers embarked on their Spanish adventure conscious that the best opportunities were concentrated in Andalicía, the meeting point between the Mediterranean sea, the Atlantic ocean and the New World. Anyway we must also remember than in the 16th century not only Tuscan people arrived to Andalucía to go to the Indies, because the new territories discovered and their wealth soon entered in the collective imagination of the all Europeans.

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