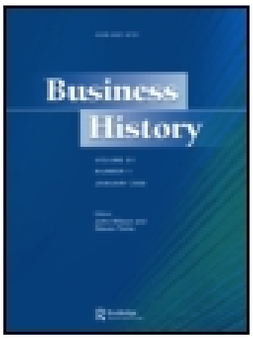

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Northern grain and the Flemish nation in Genoa: the structural consequences of a famine (1585–1616)

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ABSTRACT

This article is a case study in the formation and function of commercial networks in the early Modern Period. Analysing the network structures and strategies of foreign businessmen in urban contexts, the inquiry focuses on the Republic of Genoa's role in the grain trade during the 16th and the 17th centuries. To do so, it examines the contributions of 'Northern' merchants in the creation of new commercial networks on a European scale during a major famine. The crisis forced the Republic to open new supply channels, towards Northern Europe and the Baltic region. Through their correspondents abroad, Northern European traders were urged to send grains and agents to Genoa. They did, and the numbers and the prestige of the German and the Flemish nations in the city increased. Their presence changed the commercial networks of the Genoese victualling institution, the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, and they gained considerable influence after the famine.

KEYWORDS

Grain trade; Genoa; commercial network; minorities; famine

Introduction

Although Joseph Schumpeter (1934) identified the origin of modern business in the credit systems of Medieval banks, rather than the Industrial Revolution, the History of Business still lacks studies regarding the period prior to the eighteenth century. Some recent articles (Casson & Casson, 2014; Gelderblom & Trivellato, 2019) have emphasised the scarce number of contributions in certain fields of inquiry between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era. In general, scholars who focussed on certain strands of research, such as the early fortunes of great families or merchants in this period (Gelderblom, 2003; Gille, 1965; Häberlein, 2012; Hunt, 1994; Ryabova, 2019) have done so at the expense of many other areas, especially in the history of non-Anglophone regions (Casson & Casson, 2014, p. 1227). This is the Italian case, a geographic context in which scholars have focussed on a selection of case studies, which are primarily examples of Pre-industrial success (Cecchini, 2015; De Roover, 1963; Nigro, 2010; Orlandi, 2014). Other studies have focussed on the driving sectors of the economies of peninsular states, such as the textile industry (Ammannati, 2020; Caracausi, 2014; Poni, 2009), credit and finance (Felloni, 1998; Marsilio, 2008; Matringe, 2016; Pezzolo, 2008),

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and shipping and maritime insurance (Balard, 2003; Fusaro, 2020; Lo Basso, 2016; Maréchaux, 2020; Montemezzo, 2019).

Judicial and administrative institutions of Italian and European states occasionally acted as a 'visible hand' *ante litteram* (Chandler, 1977). However, the role they played is partially neglected in studies on these phenomena in Italy. Therefore, research focussing on how the states intervened in the economy would, in fact, allow for a better understanding of the market and the economy, both locally and globally. During the Ancien Régime, the *annona*, that is, the victualling institution, was crucial to the formation of the modern state and of the integrated European economy (Tilly, 1975; for more on the Modern state see Blanco, 2020). The political, economic, and social effects of this type of institution make it an exceptional case for studying the public intervention in markets and in strategies of supplying provisions.

This article offers a contribution to the ongoing debate on the role of institutions in the supply process in the Early Modernity. Here, I will analyse the system of Genoese grain supply between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, focussing on the arrival of foreigners, namely Germans and Flemings.[1] More generally, this study provides an example of how, during the *Ancien Regime*, disasters – especially famines – led to institutional change and reforms in the public sphere. Similar cases are the Elizabethan Poor Laws, introduced after the famine at the end of the sixteenth century (McIntosh, 2012, pp. 271–293), or the Repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 (Ward, 2004). In Genoa, the victualling institution (the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*) engaged with new intermediaries and had to find new strategies in order to facilitate the transmission of information and to avoid potential misunderstandings, incompetence or dishonesty (Casson, 1997, p. 172).

This research is rooted in two fields of inquiry: the first is the study of grain supply. In a theoretical study on the grain market in Europe, Karl Gunnar Persson observed how public intervention and the liberalisation of trade affected the stabilisation of prices and the establishment of an integrated grain market (Persson, 2004). Other scholars have addressed the case studies of Italian and European urban and national contexts, each of which adopted different grain victualling strategies. In some cases, the system was centralised in order to ensure the arrival of grain from surrounding areas to urban centres, as in Venice, Milan, or Paris (Faugeron, 2014; Kaplan, 1984; Parziale, 2009). In other cases, capital cities had so little control over the surrounding territory (for example, in seventeenth-century England, Outhwaite, 1981) that the *annona* were never fully developed or defined (Guenzi, 1981).

The analysis of grain supply is intertwined with the second field of research explored here: the study of commercial networks (especially diaspora studies), which underscores how diasporas in the Early Modern era significantly implemented the formation of long distant networks. In particular, maritime commerce was favoured by the presence of foreign communities in port cities (on the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish diasporas see Israel, 1985; Trivellato, 2009; Aslanian, 2011; Roitman, 2011. On diasporas in general, see Monge & Muchnik, 2019).

Studies on the Flemish community in Genoa place them within this theoretical framework, confirming the Flemings' tendency to establish commercial footholds in the most important European cities of the late 16th century (see Brulez, 1960; Puttevils, 2020). The Flemish presence in ports on the Atlantic, the North Sea, and the Mediterranean brought about the rapid development of long-distance maritime commercial networks, like the ones studied in this article.

Contrary to the theoretic model that identifies homophily as the criterion according to which merchants chose their commercial partners (Bem-Porath, 1980; McPherson et al., 2001), minorities proved to be fundamental in the advancement of trade. Marc Granovetter has proven that so-called *strong ties* between similar and close individuals limited access to new agents, innovation and the information that only *weak ties* (contacts between parties with little cultural and social common ground) can carry. An example of the power of weak ties is given by those between the new foreign agents and the pre-existing network, who contributed to bridge different communities (Granovetter, 1973). The Flemings and Germans who collaborated with the Genoese *Abbondanza* effectively connected different merchant communities, that is the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Northern networks.

This topic is bound up with the problem of agency. The first scholars to dwell on related theoretical issues claimed that the integration of individuals from other traditions and cultures would have been risky and unreasonably expensive. Commercial actors tried to resolve the problem of trust on a case-by-case basis, using either the legal instruments guaranteed within the market or the mechanisms tied to personal reputation (Mitnick, 1975; Ross, 1973). Avner Greif produced a classic comparative study on the management of trust among Medieval Maghribi traders, who relied on a sense of community to guarantee reciprocal trust, and contemporary Genoese merchants, who preferred to rely on the individualistic concept of reputation (Greif, 1989, 1991).

This paper, on the Republic of Genoa as a model for the management of a grain crisis in both the Italian and Mediterranean contexts, falls within these two areas of inquiry, that is, the study of victualling institutions in the Early Modern era and the study of commercial networks. The analysis of that model affords a view on the expansion of networks within the Mediterranean world that resulted from the late sixteenth-century famine.

Historical interest for networking and the role of minorities seems to have been neglected in studies on the Republic of Genoa, unlike many other Mediterranean seaports (Buti, 2012; Tazzara, 2017; Trivellato, 2009; Van Gelder, 2009). Although Greif's studies are still the object of scholarly debate, they have shed light on how Genoese merchants had already begun to employ foreign intermediaries in the Middle Ages (Greif, 1989), a tendency confirmed by Giorgio Doria's studies on the interest networks of the Genoese élites between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Their systems extended beyond the borders of the Republic thanks to the integration of Genoese merchants in commercial networks of foreign powers (Doria, 1986; Lopez, 1975). Other studies addressing foreign minorities in the Genoese state (Engels, 1997; Grendi, 1971, 2004) revealed the constant attraction that Genoa exerted on foreign communities, but did not provoke any further, deeper inquiries. Interest shifted back towards these problems over the past year (Picinno & Zanini, 2019; Zappia, 2020).

Genoa and the grain trade in the late sixteenth century

The Genoese Republic lacked a cultivatable inland and was almost completely dependent on grain imports (Quaini, 1979). For this reason, sixteenth-century Genoa is a unique case that affords for a privileged understanding of the changes in the supply of grain during shortages in a period which saw the growing relevance of foreign merchant communities in the Mediterranean (Braudel & Romano, 1951; Prosperi, 2009; Van Gelder, 2009a). In 1590–1592, a famine hit the Mediterranean. As a result of the crisis, centres without regional crops were denied provisions from suppliers that they could have usually counted

on and were thus forced to turn to new merchants. For Genoa, this meant turning to the North.

The historiography does not offer a clear picture of the two Northern communities in Genoa prior to the crisis. The well-known financial and artistic exchanges with the Atlantic and Germanic regions seem to suggest that mobility involved more than just money and works of art, and that people were also in movement. Official sources for the Early Modern period suggest, however, that there was a reduced social impact of the German and Flemish communities, which do not seem to have formed a compact and united group. Most of the Germans in the city were soldiers in the German guard (ASGe, *Camera e Finanza*, 73, n. 372). Few Flemings appear in documents, and most of them were artists and artisans. The hypothesis that their community was small is confirmed by the fact that they were represented by the consul for groups of foreigners whose numbers were insufficient to be considered a *nation*. This representative also acted on behalf of natives of Hamburg, Lubeck, Danzig, England, Holland and 'Provinces of the Flemish nation, and other places from the Hanseatic League' (ASGe, *Giunta di Marina*, 2, 23/01/1608).

This study applies Social Network Analysis methods to the payments made by the Genoese *Magistrato* in order to verify the contributions of Northern merchants to the supply of grain to the city. Data shows that, beginning with the 1590/92 famine, the *Magistrato* used two different types of agents: foreigners and Genoese merchants already living in northern centres. The latter have been recently analysed through official correspondence and accounting documents (Gullino, 2020). Furthermore, I also consider problems such as agency and the costs of the state's management of contacts and of the information flow to its intermediaries. The data presented here was acquired from systematic analyses of the *Abbondanza*'s bookkeeping which were used to produce a database of information on the variations in the quantity, quality and prices, of grain. A qualitative analysis of letterbooks of the same period provided the basis for investigating how the institution managed relationships with the intermediaries. These sources shed light on the inner functioning of the Republic's victualling institution in the markets; however, they also allow for the reconstruction of the process by which the *Abbondanza* created new commercial contacts and integrated them into a network.

The first section of the article analyzes the origins and the strategies used by foreigners to enter the circuits of the Genoese grain trade by considering three phases: before, during, and after the famine of 1590–1592. This was the key moment for the emergence of the Flemish *nazione* in the city, which occurred at a moment in which diplomatic and commercial ties between the Dutch Republic and the Mediterranean were intensifying (Allain, 2017). The second section aims at defining the figures of some entrepreneurs who established their position in trade in Genoa and, following grain trends, discovered the importance of the Republic's port as an outlet for their goods. With a powerful foreign group within the Genoese networks and ties forged with new markets, the state's institutions were forced to rethink the relationships with their agents. Thus, the *Abbondanza* protected itself from their agents' corruption in various ways, which are explored in the third section.

The system of grain supply before the crisis of 1590

Table 1 shows the *Abbondanza*'s grain purchases in the years prior to the famine (1585–1589). The data is consistent with previous findings (Grendi, 1970) and it shows that over 95% of the grain that arrived in Genoa was either from Genoese territories in the Mediterranean or from other areas of Italy, such as Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Tabarca, Puglia, and the Maremma. The state depended on Genoese merchants operating in these locations.

Table 1. Grain purchased by the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, in Genoese *mine*, 1585–1589 (1 *mina* = 95,29 kg).

Grain	1585	1586	1587	1588	1589	Total grain received	%
Grain from Lombardy	6,927	123				**7,050**	**3,1**
Grain from Tabarca	2,000	2,200	8,419		6,940	**19,559**	**8,6**
Grain from the Maremma	192	5,512	2,140	7,370	11,390	**26,604**	**11,7**
Spanish Grain		880				**880**	**0,4**
Ruchielle from Sicily		3,710			9,619	**13,329**	**5,8**
Grain from Corsica		2,594				**2,594**	**1,1**
Ruchielle		47,832	17,710	7,117	12,646	**85,305**	**37,4**
Sicilian wheat		500	3,540		700	**4,740**	**2,1**
Durum wheat		12,075	21,448	8,895	400	**42,818**	**18,8**
Sardinian Grains			8,498	5,102		**13,600**	**6**
Sicilian Grain				7,565		**7,565**	**3,3**
Unspecified grains		2,906	413		701	**4,020**	**1,7**
Total grain received	**9,119**	**78,332**	**62,168**	**36,049**	**42,396**	**228,064**	**100**

Source: ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 22, 23, 28, 29.

Prior to the famine of the late-sixteenth century, the *Abbondanza* could rely on the Mediterranean harvests and on a network of Genoese citizens that was sufficient for the Republic's needs. This policy was favoured by the Genoese commercial diaspora (Doria, 1986; Lo Basso, 2015) in the main trading Northern ports. Figure 1 shows that the *Abbondanza*'s agents, who were mostly banker-merchants of the Genoese élite, shared origins and social extraction. The only complex cluster—also of Genoese citizens—was in Sicily, which was Liguria's main grain supplier (Heers, 1961, pp. 331–336; Malanima, 1995, pp. 383–385). Sources document the Republic's dependence on the same suppliers during the second half of the sixteenth century—a symptom that these provisioners had proven their trustworthiness. Genoa might have relied on those agents because the merchant-traders holding political power had personal economic interests in the *Abbondanza* and the grain trade. This overlap of common good and private stakes was typical in the Early Modern period, especially in Genoa (Doria, 1986, p. 75).

The famine: Northern grain during and after the crisis

The regular provisions of Mediterranean grain were interrupted by the famine of 1590–1592 (Clark, 1985), when Genoa sought out new markets with which to resupply. This process would contribute to strengthening trade routes, whose economic importance would go far beyond the import of grain. In addition to declaring Genoa a free port, and thus creating benefits to attract provisions for the city (ASGe, *Archivio Segreto,* 837, 11/09/1590), the Republic turned to its network of well-placed agents within the grain market and directed its requests towards Antwerp and Amsterdam, both of which had become the most important hubs for the distribution of Baltic grain.

Here the famine caused Southern European merchants to start a 'grain race', which brought the Dutch and Zealanders into the trade circuits for grain (Sneller, 1935, p. 99). The interest for grain exportation to the Mediterranean was favoured by the incredible growth of prices (in Genoa +120% between 1589 and 1591) which could not be normalised with the help of nearby states. In 1590, through the edict that declared Genoa a free port, the Republic increased prospects of potential gains by guaranteeing fiscal and juridical benefits.

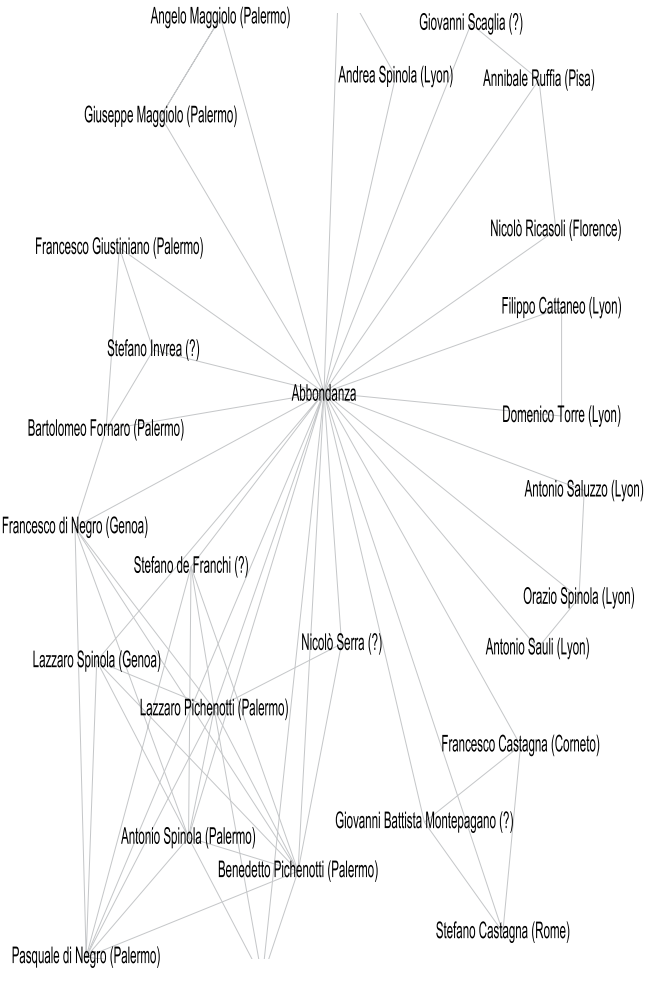

Figure 1. The network of the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, 1585–1589.
Source: ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 22, 23, 28, 29, 699, 700.

Notwithstanding sporadic presence of Flemish merchants in Liguria before 1590, it seems that Genoa became an attractive destination for Northerners only after that edict, which resulted in the opening of a route that had, till then, been 'almost non-existent' (Van Tielhof, 2002, p. 204). The amount of incoming grain can be reconstructed thanks to the *Abbondanza*'s account books of 1591. In six months, 60.237 *mine* of grain arrived in Genoa's port—a quantity significantly greater than the imports of the years immediately preceding the crisis (Table 2). Of that grain, 42.759 (over 70%) came from Northern Europe, especially Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Middelburg, on Northern ships.

At the beginning of the famine, the Genoese merchants residing abroad contributed either by sending grain, e.g. the Balbi brothers in Antwerp, or by engaging with non-Genoese merchants and networks to facilitate the flow of cereals to Genoa (Gullino, 2020). Although initially the Genoese contribution seemed decisive (the Balbi brothers imported 13.366 *mine* of cereals), it was almost immediately matched by Nothern imports (e.g. the Vertemal brothers sent 12.000 *mine*, and Pieter Lijntgens 11.220). Furthermore, the first ships to reach Genoa in March 1591 were those with the grain sent for Jan Bukentorp, thus proving that the Northern merchants reacted quickly to the critical situation. A little more than six months passed between the first

Table 2. Grain purchased by the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza* in Genoese *mine,* January-July 1591 (1 *mina* = 95,29 kg).

Grain type	Total grain received	%
Grains from the North	**42,759**	**71**
Lombard grains	**2,139**	**3,6**
Grain from Oran	**1,598**	**2,6**
Durum wheat	**4,711**	**7,8**
Grain	**2,475**	**4,1**
Barley	**6,344**	**10,5**
Unspecified grains	**211**	**0,4**
Total grain received	**60,237**	**100**

Source: ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 31.

signs of famine and the arrival of the first supply ships, which had left for Genoa after three months. Instead, the supplies sent by the Genoese merchants arrived only in the summer.

During the famine, the structure and the breadth of the *Abbondanza*'s official network changed (Figure 2) and extended beyond the Mediterranean thanks to foreign merchants. In this process, the flux of goods and shipowners from the North significantly altered the city's demographics. Beginning in 1591, Genoese sources record an increase in immigrants from Holland and Zeeland (ASGe, *Conservatori del Mare*, 5–6).

In the years following the crisis, the role of foreigners in the supply chain was conditioned by the redefinition of Genoa's status as free port (Giacchero, 1972; Kirk, 2005, pp. 151–157). In the *Magistrato*'s account books, purchases made in Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Hamburg appear to have been determined by the conditions of import tax exemptions made by the Republic, which regularly revised commercial privileges (ASGe, *Archivio Segreto*, 1028, n. 72; 156). These measures became an economic and political tool, which, according to the interests of the Republic, either included or excluded goods and merchants based on their origin. If, indeed, at the outset of the famine, the objective had been to attract Flemings and Hanseatic traders to make Genoa a base for trade with the North, after the crisis, such benefits were not renewed. Northerners who had imported significant amounts of goods to the Ligurian capital and counted on a renewal of exemptions saw important economic damage. They filed a petition, a legal instrument commonly used by foreign communities in Italy to influence the state's economic politics (Cecchini & Pezzolo, 2012; Nubola, 2001; Van Gelder, 2009a). In 1594, the Fleming Gio Delmar directed the document to the Senate to have the benefits reinstated. He reminded the Genoese of the role that his fellow countrymen had played during the famine and pointed out the advantages that the city would have had by renewing the privilege (Giacchero, 1972, p. 83). The petition was successful, and the imports from the North continued, remaining in the hands of a select group of Northerners who were stable members of the Magistrate's network and who controlled most of the grain flow to Genoa (Figure 3).

Table 3 shows that, between 1593 and 1608, grain and rye *di ponente*, that is, from the North, amounted to 22% of the total grain imported to Genoa, versus the 8% supplied by Sicily.

Foreign merchants in the *Abbondanza*'s network

Most of the 111.864 *mine* of grain that arrived in Genoa from Hanseatic cities between 1593 and 1608 was sold to the Republic by foreign merchants, whose control over the movement

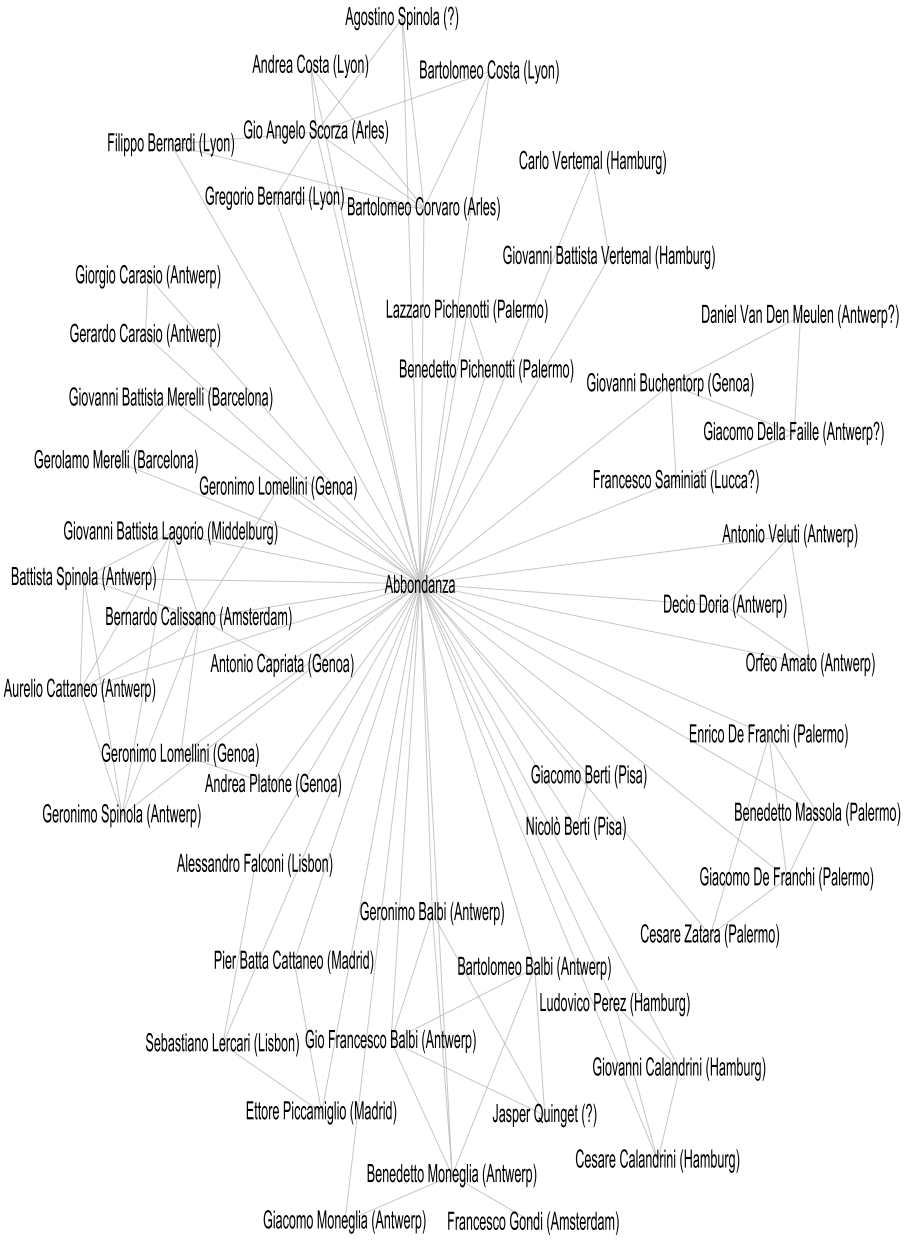

Figure 2. The network of the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, 1590–1592.
Source: ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 31, 700, 701.

of grain towards the Ligurian port was, by then, remarkable. Contrary to the period of famine, when the Genoese community abroad contributed to cereal shipments, after the crisis grain flows from the North seem to be firmly in the hands of Northern merchants. Thanks to the representatives of trading companies who were sent to manage the flux of goods, after 1590 the Flemings' economic importance grew.

One exemplary case is the company formed by Jacques Della Faille (Schmitz, 1967) and Daniel Van Der Meulen (Jongbloet-Van Houtte, 1986; Sneller, 1935), based in Antwerp and

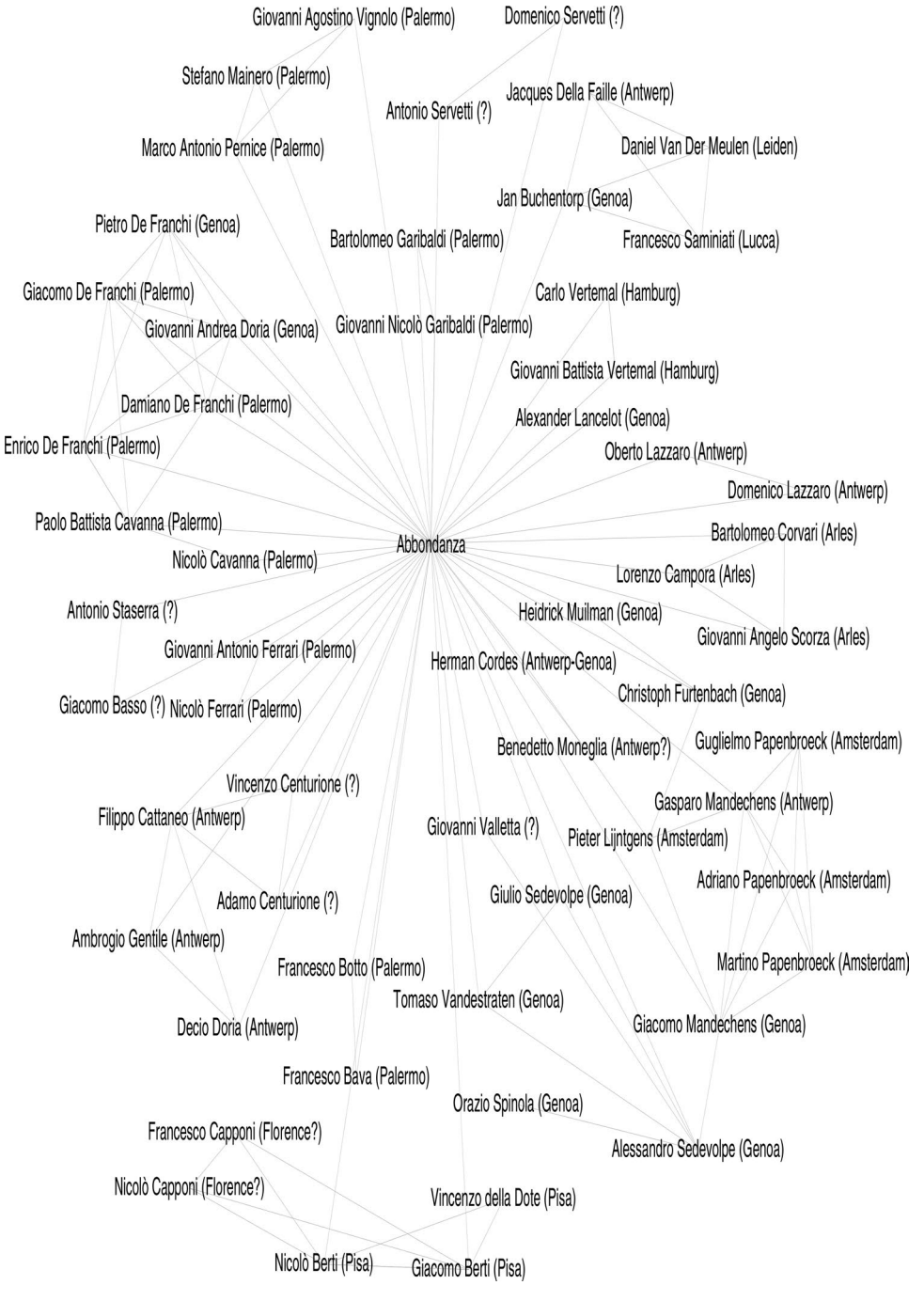

Figure 3. The network of the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, 1593–1608.
Source: ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 31, 34, 38, 39, 40, 41, 45, 47, 49, 701, 702.

Leiden. Their agent in Genoa, Jan Bukentorp (Engels, 1997, p. 120), was an important link in their European network. Sending a representative abroad was costly, so the expectations for earnings in Genoa must have been high, considering that Bukentorp stayed in the city till

Table 3. Grain purchased by the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, in Genoese *mine*, 1593–1608 (1 *mina* = 95,29 kg).

Grain type	1593	1596*	1597	1598	1599	1600	1601	1602	1603	1604	1605	1606	1607	1608	Total	%
Grain from Lombardy	565				512	1,492	1,681								4.250	**0,7**
Grain from Tabarca					539	953									1,492	**0,2**
Grain from the Maremma	701,5				2,593	1,973	332								5,599,5	**0,9**
Grain from the North	451	16,509	9,410,5				1,048			5,050	12,988	17,532	33,595	7,365	103,948,5	**16,9**
Sicilian *Ruchielle*					8,392	12,093									20,485	**3,3**
Corsican grain	786		1,401,5		600	282									3,069,5	**0,5**
Grain from Catalogna			517												517	**0,1**
Ruchielle			446	12,267	28,295	15,254	20,331	35,594			7,050				119,237	**19,4**
Grain from Apulia					8,679	15,595									24,274	**3,9**
Durum from Apulia					30.586	2,444									33,030	**5,4**
Durum from the Levant						2,220	4,633		11,750						18,603	**3**
Durum wheat					300		14,218		694	2,633					17,845	**2,9**
Sassette				1,085	2,953			433	5,906	20,566	9,486		9,294	13,457	63,180	**10,3**
Sardinian Grains									1.086						1,086	**0,2**
Sicilian Grains				52,839		7,050	2.802	11,565							74,256	**12,1**
Grain from Provence	9,608,5				140										9,748,5	**1,6**
French Grain									11,470		595	8,679	5,318		26,062	**4,2**
Unspecified grain										1,755		10,188			11,943	**1,9**
Rye	366							3,083						5,498	8,947	**1,4**
Rye from the North	2,300	4,796	25,818			7,050	7,463				8.638	7,603	3,758	784	68,210	**11,05**
Rye from Provence					114										114	**0,01**
Rye from Piedmont					237										237	**0,04**
Total	**14,778**	**21,305**	**37,593**	**66,191**	**83,940**	**66,406**	**52,508**	**50,675**	**30,906**	**30,004**	**38,757**	**44,002**	**51,965**	**27,104**	**616,134**	**100**

*For this year records are partial.
Source: ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 31, 34, 38, 39, 40, 41, 45, 47, 49.

1598 (Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken, Daniël van der Meulen, 153). Bukentorp was crowned by success; he received three loads of rye from Amsterdam in March 1591 and another nine arrived in the following months (ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 723, 6/03/1591; ASGe, *Notai Antichi*, 3855, 1/08/1591). Sources suggest that he was well known among the Genoese merchants and that he contributed to managing the relationships between the Republic and his compatriots, whom he often represented acting as a legal agent (ASGe, *Notai Antichi*, 3063, 20/10/1592).

Other Northern representatives that engaged with the *Abbondanza* were the Vertemal brothers—probably Germans—who owned a Hamburg-based enterprise. For the cereal trade they did not use an agent *in loco*; rather, they negotiated directly with the *Magistrato*, as attested by numerous letters in the archives, which are useful in reconstructing their role in replenishing the Genoese grain stockpiles (ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 726).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, most of the grain shipments to Genoa were in the hands of three men: Giacomo Mandechens, Christoph Furtenbach, and Alessandro Sedevolpe. Sources record that Sedevolpe was a German who had settled in Genoa and who was in business with his brother, with whom he dealt in more than just grain. From the Ligurian port they created a commercial network that reached from the coasts of the Middle East to Spain and France, and all the way to Germany, where they traded in various goods (ASGe, *San Giorgio, Sala 38*, 1470, c. 2r; ASGe, *San Giorgio, Sala 38*, 1330, cc. 41r; 57r). Sedevolpe's presence in Genoa caused the local authorities some embarrassment: in the Spanish archives there is an official complaint that he hosted Protestant sailors during Lent (AGS, *Estado*, 1431, f. 196). He also contributed significantly to the Genoese grain stockpile; of the 37.956 *mine* acquired by the *Abbondanza* in 1603, 22.152 (58.3%) were supplied by Sedevolpe. The following year, he sold 14.958 (49.8%) of the 30.004 *mine* of grain purchased by the Republic (ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 40; 41).

Christoph Furtenbach was probably the most important German merchant to reside in Genoa prior to the famine. In 1577, he arrived in the city as an agent of the Függer family; his network connected Spain, Danzig, Vienna, Amsterdam, Milan, Piacenza, and Hamburg (Kellenbenz, 1972; Lamberti, 1972). The German bankers had initially put him in charge of the mineral trade, for which Genoa was a port of call; later he dealt in grain and made considerable contributions to the Ligurian grain stockpiles. In 1608 the sales to the *Abbondanza* of grain from the North amounted to over 19.000 *mine*, i.e. 36% of the 52.656 total *mine* purchased by it. Thanks to his reputation, in 1612 he introduced to the *Abbondanza*'s officers his nephew, Paolo Raynolt, who would become one of the main suppliers of the Republic for the following years (ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 72, c. 23; Lamberti, 1972). Furtenbach's commercial activities were not limited to grain: he dealt in linen, lead, silk, lumber, herring, caviar, leather, and saffron, which he shipped regularly to Genoa from Valencia, Alicante, Norway, Moscow (ASGe, *San Giorgio Sala 38*, 1330, cc. 78, 105, 113, 140, 152).

The pre-eminent positions held by Sedevolpe and Furtenbach in the Genoese grain trade were threatened by Giacomo Mandechens, the representative of Pieter Lijntgens, a shareholder in the Dutch East India Company (Ijzerman, 1928). He appears in the Genoese records in 1592, when he supplied the *Abbondanza* two shipments of cereals (ASGe, *Notai Antichi*, 3062, april 1592). Giacomo's network included his brother Gasparo, who managed the shipping of grain from Amsterdam (ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 40), and the Papenbroeck firm, based in Amsterdam and Antwerp (ASGe, *Notai Antichi*, 5270, 5/09/1605). Although Mandechens'

business in Genoa was initially tied to grain commerce, he extended his trafficking to other goods, such as leather, lumber, skins and textiles, iron and herring, and to ports such as Seville, Lubeck, and some Italian cities. (ASGe, *San Giorgio Sala 38*, 1330, cc. 46, 74, 77).

Sources present sporadic ties between the Abbondanza and other Flemish merchants that transferred to Genoa, including Heindrick Muilman, who became a consul of the *nazione*, Tomaso Vandestraten, and Alexander Lancelot, among others.

With Northerners managing goods so vital for the Genoese economy, the importance of the Flemings in the city grew significantly. They could exert pressure on the Republic and their homeland to be recognised as a community. Various aggressions against the Flemish consul and against German merchants (ASGe, *Giunta di Marina*, 2, 8/10/1615) encouraged the Genoese Senate to accept a request, made by the 'States General of the United Low Countries', to have Nicolò Van Rijn as consul of its citizens in the city (ASGe, *Giunta di Marina*, 2, 23/02/1616).

Managing northerners: a foreign network

After the introduction of Northern grain during the famine, Genoa did not return to its traditional suppliers. The first reason for this was the rise in prices of Sicilian grains, which had sufficed for all of Italy till then, and of the licences for its exportation (*tratte*) (Fazio, 1993, pp. 23–28; Grendi, 1970, p. 147). After the famine, the Genoese sought supplies from Atlantic ports with greater frequency and the Republic's officials weighed the abundant information they had from their informants in evaluating whether to continue to resupply from the North during regular harvests (ASCGe, *Abbondanza*, 727, n. 1). Despite the elevated costs of transportation (the main cost for grain traders, see Persson, 2004, p. 87), grain from the North was still more convenient. The advantages were probably not limited to the grain trade, because commerce with the North was certainly not unilateral. Like Leghorn (Tazzara, 2017), Genoa became a point of reference for Northern ships that exported grain to Italy, from where they returned carrying citrus, capers, dried fruit, and oil (Bicci, 1986). In addition to being an important outlet for certain goods, Genoa was a crucial port of access for various parts of the Italian peninsula, such as the Duchy of Milan and the cities of Parma, Piacenza, and Bologna, which were also stops for silver that arrived by sea to Genoa from Spain (Ghilino, 1996, pp. 44–51). These ties might have been supported by individual merchants and members of the Genoese government in order to protect and strengthen their interests in the North (such as in the case of the Balbi family, in Grendi, 1997).

Trusting new partners and business intermediaries posed new problems for the *Abbondanza*, which had to verify their reliability. Scholars who have focussed on agency have underscored agents' ability 'to operate in their own self-interest rather than in the best interests of the firm' (Carlos, 1992, p. 140). If this was true for smaller networks, in which face-to-face interaction was frequent, it was even more so for long-distance networks, which united individuals who were not bound by social, moral, or religious ties. To ensure the loyalty of their agents, the officers of the *Abbondanza* resorted to at least three solutions: the triangulation of information to verify its quality, choosing representatives based on their reputation, and joint participation in profits.

Firstly, the *Abbondanza* maintained constant contacts with foreign intermediaries abroad, such as in the case of the Vertemal brothers. Their correspondence shows a succession of letters seeking reports on the status of supplies and on the purchases

made by other merchants. They also sought information on harvests, quality, availability, and prices of various types of grains on foreign marketplaces. If in most networks this information arrived asymmetrically and could be manipulated by agents (Lamoreaux et al., 2009, p. 46), the Abbondanza's officers would verify the reports with those offered by trusted Genoese correspondents. In Flanders and in Germany, the Republic could count on a vast network of Genoese agents, such as the Balbi, Spinola, and Pichenotti families, who acted as pawns in the Republic's intelligence ring. This counter-information would allow them to realise in time if an agent was disloyal or if he provided incongruent data.

Secondly, the *Abbondanza* interacted with merchants who had verified reputations: purchases in the account books record payments to the Della Faille-Van Der Meulen or the Lijntgens enterprises, whose fame made them even more trustworthy. In both cases, the *Magistrato* must have been reassured by the stable presence of one of their agents in Genoa. This, however, makes reconstructing their exchanges with the grain-victualling institution more complicated, as they left no trace in archival records, except for some invoices and requests of payment.

Thirdly, the officers were a convenient economic partner for foreign merchants. The *Abbondanza* relied on the *Banco di San Giorgio*, by far the most important bank in Genoa, which guaranteed solvency, even with the public coffers haemorrhaging money elsewhere. This situation drove up debt for the Republic and for the *Banco*, causing a vicious cycle of reforms (Gatti, 1973) and loans that do not seem to have had effects on creditors in this period. For the foreign merchants, the allure of trading with Genoa, and specifically with the *Abbondanza*, was tied to the fiscal benefits, which went almost uninterrupted after 1590. In addition to the free port privileges—which were limited in 1609 to exclude grain from exempt goods—merchants importing grain for the State received the guarantee of at least 33% of the stakes. Therefore, merchants could have a third of every load, contrary to the Senate's edicts, which prohibited exportation of cereals (ASGe, *Archivio Segreto*, 1559, 21/09/1591). On the basis of the flux of prices, Northern merchants decided whether to sell the grain to the *Abbondanza* immediately, to re-export, or to conserve it in the city's warehouses and silos until it would have been advantageous to put it on the market. The great quantity of grain kept in the private silos could contribute to the alteration or stabilisation of the price of grain, depending on when it was put on the market (Persson, 2004, pp. 76–77). In this sense, Giacomo Mandechens offers a case in point; in his *post-mortem* inventory, 22.911 *mine* of rye and wheat are recorded in over thirty private warehouses (ASGe, *Notai Antichi*, 4720, 13/09/1605). This situation threatened to weaken the leadership of the *Magistrato* in both his ability to supply grain – since the officers were increasingly dependent on foreign merchants with which they had weak ties – and in his ability to establish sale prices, which depended on factors beyond the *Abbondanza*'s control.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the changes in the Republic of Genoa's system of grain supply between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. The networks of the *Magistrato dell'Abbondanza*, which had previously been geographically limited, grew significantly during the famine of 1590–1592 and expanded to prominent cities in

European trade. Most significantly, the system included new actors, namely foreigners, whose presence in the network itself required Genoese officials to find new solutions in order to maintain their control over it.

As Persson theorised (2004, p. 72), during the crisis, the government and the victualling institution intervened decisively in the market and attempted to encourage the arrivals of merchants who could restock the state's supplies while stabilising prices. The state's interventionism materialised in the decrees establishing Genoa as a free port, thus making the city a centre for groups of Flemings and Germans, attracted by the high grain prices. These changes in the supply chain, far from being chance, would be secured and last for decades, during which there was a regularisation of arrivals of ships and goods from the Hanseatic area. On a social level, the importance of the Flemings grew in Genoa; in 1616 the Republic recognised them as a 'nation' (*nazione*), granting them a representative consul. The more relevant economic consequences were caused by the shifting networks and the strengthening of the merchant community, both resulting from the famine. The change was so extreme that in 1613 the Genoese Senate claimed that 'the Flemings have almost all commerce and trade in the palm of their hand' (ASGe, *Archivio Segreto*, 1652, n. 22). Their permeation of local business primarily invested in the grain sector, in which a small number of individuals controlled most of the imports – and not only those from their areas of origin. In the first years of the seventeenth century, they imported *sassette* grain, French grains, and grains from the Levant, which suggest that Genoa had become 'the hub of a dense network, and […] guaranteed connections between regions and areas quite distant from one another or separated by barriers of various kinds' (Orlandi, 2019, p. 50). In these circumstances, the *Abbondanza* acted to protect its interests from the new agents within its own network. While guaranteeing the constant arrival of grain at competitive prices, once the famine had subsided the Northerners undermined the dynamics within the network of supply and redistribution. Doing so, they contrasted the economic theories that saw ports of trade as the cornerstone of long-distance commerce, in which foreigners had benefits, with a strong institutional presence regulating their operations (Addobbati, 2012; Polanyi, 1963).

After the crisis, the economic developments and the constant negotiations between the government, the *Banco di San Giorgio*, and the foreign merchants favoured the integration of the Northern and Southern European markets, thus pointing to the city's position as a key port in the Mediterranean. For the merchant navies of Northern Europe, Genoa became an outlet for products and not just a port of call, forcing the Republic to build new infrastructures for storing unprecedented quantities of goods in the port area (Giacchero, 1972, pp. 121–125). In the first half of the seventeenth century, Genoa became a new commodity market; this system, by which goods would get stocked and resold wholesale or retail (Braudel, 1992, pp. 93–97), would remain in place until the crisis following the plague of 1656–57. The famine of the late sixteenth century triggered a re-systematization of Genoa's victualling office as well as its institutional and economic development. The officers of the *Abbondanza* reached new markets and sought to maintain leadership over a network of commercial and intelligence which gradually grew in density, complexity, and size. They encouraged the use of commercial routes that not been used for grain and quickly established a fundamental link in the exchange between northern and southern Europe (Braudel, 1986, pp. 634–635; Heers, 1961, pp. 321–362), many traces of which still lay untapped in Genoese archives.

Note

1. Sources often confuse those who came from the regions that are now Belgium and Holland (the same individual can be found as *Belgicus, Flamengus* or *Olandensis*). This broad definition of "*flamengo*" (Fleming), that included people from a large geographic area, is applied in the present article.

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