

**Italian merchants, international fairs:
the Italian answer to new markets (15th-17th centuries)**

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At their apex, fairs were the pivot of European economic system both in its mercantile and financial components. Great international fairs were ruled by narrow groups of merchants, largely - if not entirely - dominated by Italian merchants, from Tuscany, Genoa, Lombardy and in lesser part from Venice, given Venetian prevailing interest in the maritime trade with the Near and Middle East and the Islamic world.

In the 16th century the fair system in Europe underwent a visible and unstoppable decline in its importance for exchange practices; in the meanwhile, European trade became more and more elitist, but Italian traders lost their dominating position inside the mercantile community.

In particular reference to the Italian case, the economic decline of fairs has been associated with the weakening of the position of Italian merchants (still mainly Tuscans and Lombards), shifting from protagonists to secondary characters in international trade. The crisis of Italian economy in the sixteenth century finds some evidence also in the gradual decrease of Italian attendance at the fairs of Lyon, Bruges, Antwerp, or Frankfurt, and in the parallel loss of the primacy in the game of exchanges that was once an Italian monopoly.

This paper aims to draw attention to the adaptation ability and the flexibility Italian merchants showed in coping with their increasing exclusion from some of the main European markets. The case of the Republic of Venice is an interesting example of this process. In the early modern age, in the Venetian Mainland two areas progressively came to be defined as a system. The first had the city of Verona at its core. Already in the Late Middle Ages its powerful mercantile elite had consolidated

a trade circuit that extended from the countries beyond the Alps to the south of the Italian peninsula and to the Balkans, thanks to the role that the Adriatic fairs played as intermediaries. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Veronese organized an efficient system of fairs in Verona itself, which included fairs for trade in goods (*fiera merci*) and in money (*fiera di cambio*), while at the same time drawing into their orbit the fairs of Bolzano and of Vicenza. This network also comprised the fair of Senigallia, which from the seventeenth century, as far as turnover was concerned, took the place of the small fairs along the Adriatic and became their preferred trading place with the East and the Mediterranean area in general. If the structural crisis of the European economy and the population expansion of the sixteenth century forced a change in the manufactured goods of the city, from a social point of view the process of transforming the governing elite of Verona into an aristocracy meant that instead of investing in goods and manufactured products, investments were in land. A new class of merchants took over from the old group specializing in the production and commercialisation of new products such as knitted goods, berets, semi-finished silk goods, and raw silk, which enabled both old and new markets to keep functioning.

In the case of Verona, new merchants and new products continued to move within strong commercial circuits, whose attraction extended to Vicenza, so much so that merchants from Vicenza decided to favour the markets of northern Europe. If in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the rural areas around Vicenza saw a considerable development in the production of woollen cloth of an inferior quality, we know that commerce in these products was mainly controlled by Venetian merchants. When silk yarn and textiles, now manufactured in urban centres, became the primary product, Venetians were progressively marginalized, while the merchants of Vicenza, often members of the governing elite, took over the trade monopolies, penetrating especially the English, German, French, and Dutch markets. A sign that a significant change had taken place and that the merchants had broken away from the capital is the fact that semi-worked silk products manufactured in the area of Verona, whose quality was inferior to that of Vicenza, were anyway traded with those of Vicenza. The two mainland towns not only acted together, but both preferred to intensify their trade links with the markets of Northern Europe.

It is interesting to note that the consolidated circuits and the old trade networks disprove the traditional theory of an Italy cut in half between north and south. A more plausible theory would see a division between western and eastern areas along the Apennine chain. This idea of a line of division along the Apennines is confirmed by the limited trade relations between the Adriatic and the Tyrrhenian coast: the two coasts traded more frequently with their foreign counterparts than with each other. In this geographical division, the *réseaux marchands* from Venice and the Veneto area (not forgetting that the latter mainly traded with markets opened by the former) extended towards the areas of the Adriatic, the Levant, and the Near East. In the fairs scattered along the coast, such as those at Recanati, Fano, Lanciano, and Senigallia, they traded manufactured goods produced in the city workshops or in part imported from continental Europe along with the raw materials, which were essential for the urban industries, like leather, wool, dyes, oil, wax, cereals and agricultural products, and others of considerable value from the East.

The Lombard area had a network of fairs that had at its centre the great fair of Bergamo, the most important sixteenth-century fair in Italy. The powerful Bergamo merchants, mostly involved in textiles, wool, but also hemp and linen and later silk, and progressively in metal work, made the fair the hub of their international dealings. It extended in all directions from the Rialto and the Veneto markets to those beyond the Alps and to Lombardy. However, during the seventeenth century it was Milan which mostly attracted the Bergamo merchants. The capital of Lombardy became the main market for sorting and linked Lombardy to Genoa, Geneva, and Lyons, becoming a centre for the procurement of supplies for neighbouring countries. The Bergamo merchants also managed to maintain a presence in the east, availing themselves of the same contacts and merchant networks as the Brescian operators. The latter's organization and financial capability, at least in the eighteenth century, was totally subordinate to the Bergamo merchants, or rather to the merchants operating in Bergamo, characterized already in the seventeenth century by an enterprising minority of Swiss merchants. A circuit of fairs became operative and included the Bergamo Fair of Saint Alexander that, together with the fair of Senigallia, was the most important one in eighteenth-century Italy, in a short time drawing into its orbit the fairs of Brescia, Bolzano and Senigallia itself. This circuit

was at the centre of a mercantile network whose hub was Milan, both as a sorting centre and as what was to become an important financial market, and which included Genoa, whose port was competing more and more with that of Venice. From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a process of regionalization took place in the Lombard area, which re-proposed a return to the boundaries of the Lombardy of the Visconti. The Bergamo and Brescia areas became the eastern borders in that process of consolidation, which in time shifted away from Venice, but certainly steps had been taken to hasten the change in the balance of power from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.

It is not surprising, then, from a demographic point of view that after the 1630 plague had wiped out a third of the population of Northern Italy, recovery took place above all in rural areas, swelling the big villages and only moderately affecting the towns. The deconstructing of urban industry was an obstacle to recovery in the seventeenth century in the towns of the Veneto, while the more significant population growth in the countryside made it possible for the primary sector to interact with manufacturing. Confirmation of this comes from the increase in the number of fairs in less important centres, above all in areas like that around Vicenza, characterized by a long manufacturing tradition in the villages situated in the pre-alpine belt, like Schio, Valdagno and Thiene, where the revival of the wool industry, already apparent in the late seventeenth century, continued throughout the following century.

However, this situation seemed to have interacted with a different economic scenario in Europe that came into being in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and it is the fairs that help to shed light in this direction. They show how Italian merchants in the same period gradually moved towards the east, acquiring market space in the great states in Eastern Europe. The gatherings at Antwerp and Lyons were gradually replaced in Italian commercial strategy, and by the Veneto merchants themselves, by Frankfurt, Leipzig, Lublin, and Jaroslaw. Italians responded to the gradual marginalizing of western markets by moving their activities towards the east, where they still managed to dominate market quotas, as can be seen in the case of Alessandro Guagnini, a Veronese merchant and nobleman who, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, had commercial dealings with countries that included Poland

and Sweden. Here the demand for cloths and silk products intended for the upper classes of these societies, as for the Ottoman market, might have further stimulated in the Italian merchant entrepreneurs a specific interest in silk production, in particular for perhaps more valuable manufactured goods.

After the sixteenth century, demand seemed to undergo a substantial transformation, even though we still know little about the nature of the conditions that made a revolution in consumer goods possible. On this subject, we must accept that long term change was not equally rapid everywhere, without wanting to compare societies subject to change and those that were static. If in some European regions changes in taste and the consolidation of the idea of fashion privileged the new English draperies and French silks, with a corresponding loss of competitiveness for Italian products, there were still those, probably mainly the upper classes, who continued to express their affection for Italian luxury goods, including those made in the Veneto and Venezia.