

International Relations and the Colonial System in Medieval Genoa

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Some hundreds of settlements in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Europe and the Atlantic islands are already testimony to the presence of Genoese in the world in the Middle Ages.

However, they do not cover all examples of the phenomenal expansion which Columbus' journey isn't the conclusion of, but the continuation of a phenomenon of particular and extensive contact and migration.

It is a system of relations and international presence which is completely different from that of Venice, often remembered by analogy, from which it differs in the most part by action and the methods and tools used. In fact, its spatial width is certainly much greater than that of Venice, and it is totally immune from state intervention, which exists in Venice. The expansion of the Genoese, in fact, develops instead on the basis of strategic action by private or public-private according to formulas that differ considerably, but complement the operation of a network designed to ensure maximum operational flexibility.

For the medieval Genoese international relations and settlement systems are inseparable elements. Note the use of the word "Genoese" and not the word "Genoa". In the last century, Roberto Lopez, an important medieval historian, was the first to report the importance of this distinction, which stems from an original story, which you will see, I hope, later in this speech.

In the eleventh century, Genoa, a city that neither then nor in subsequent centuries exceeds a population of 100,000, undergoes a major political metamorphosis that permanently transformed the most important Mediterranean port, and European stronghold and enhances its role as the most "Atlantic" of Italian cities.

Genoa is in the western area of Europe and is one of the vertices of a major nerve center of the Italian peninsula. Where people and goods arrive and pass through towards the heart of Europe and where were born, on the existing feudal fabric, the Italian Communes, city-states geographically located between the Alps and the Tiber.

This system promotes the role of the city. At the center of a territorial arc that at that time was wider and deeper than the current one, with good communication links in every direction, Genoa sees a concentration of activities and a movement of ethnic groups and cultures from all over the known world. From that moment, the Genoese, favored by the extreme political divisions of the time, became the protagonists of expansion, which will play a key role in the formation of a new West.

They are aided in their operations by the maintained fidelity to the particular form of organization of their Commune, but also the interpretation given to the term “city” and urban culture that derives from it, which they export all over the world. The Genoese see the city and, more generally, any kind of settlement or contact, direct, indirect, private, public, semi-public as a possible form of investment, which must have not only one form of management applied but, from time to time, one considered more appropriate, encouraging the planting of the cultural and social models that they bear. For this reason migration is easy for them, people who live in a rocky and poor country, but have in front of them the sea and the world.

In their history, the Genoese are in fact more faithful to the formula of “Compagna” from which the City was born. A group of warriors turned merchants, they come from a higher social stratum, but not only feudal extraction. Since the end of the eleventh century and for the duration of its history, that is, until 1797 when Napoleon Bonaparte created the Democratic Republic of Liguria, the Commune of Genoa was governed by large clans, joined by family alliances, which then spread out in artificial groups with the unique name of “Alberghi” which are aspects related to modern corporations. The success in creating a powerful, flexible international network, which is preserved, yet changes and grows over time, demonstrates the validity of this formula destined to remain unchanged until the contemporary age.

In fact the necessity to change the operational areas, working hard to move the frontiers, enforces strict rules that ensure greater freedom of action and greater safety of movement. To this end the Genoese choose to remain loyal to the use of traditional models, by nature solid and stable. They decide to keep intact even the performance of centrality of the patriarchal family business, rich in men to send out into the world. It therefore remains in force the covenant of marriage as a means of founding a pact between the clans. The choice of the free economy – the market – brings with it a fundamental transformation, where money becomes a tool for growth and affirmation. This formula assumes a structural nature and affects the Genoese far and wide, ranging from the Black Sea to the Iberian Peninsula and will pass into the Americas. This formula will produce a lot of money for the elite of the main port of the Mediterranean that, with the flexible form of network tightens any kind of agreement with the owners of hundreds of cells that make up the mosaic of international power.

For this reason, in the late eleventh and early twelfth-century Genoa, the heart of a decisive and consistent policy of attention towards the Atlantic spaces and control center of the strategic points of the Levantine market, creates a network intended to support free circulation of commodities between the East and extreme western part of Europe, giving rise to direct public rule only where absolutely necessary, preferring instead, as far as possible and in any way, the constant search of privileges and monopolies.

It is well known that branches of different clans are installed everywhere, naturalizing, taking other surnames and marrying with local nobility, that the Genoese move their men without limiting the operation, resulting in neighborhoods and commercial privileges, controlling the routes from the eastern Mediterranean to the Far West. So they choose to apply systems of variable contacts. This behavior, open to alliances that go beyond all physical or ideological borders, is the prevailing reason for their success and their broad presence in the world. It has a very modern essence in political-economic management models and relational and expansive models, and anticipates the formulas of the Dutch and the British. Fernand Braudel was right when he called the Genoese capitalism “dramatic” because it forced, generated by a rough and poor region and the preeminent choice of the market. However, it became the founding element of a world-economy that lead to globalization.

Without losing contact with the mother city, where they seek to maintain roles in government in exchange for fierce struggles famous even in their time, family groups along with allies and employees, whenever they choose in which form to proceed. Genoese and Ligurians can live in special quarters in the West, to obtain landing sites and trading posts in the East or to create personal domains, or, as in the Black Sea, reshaping or molding the city, readjusting until it becomes “another Genoa”. The private dominates public life. They maintain the life of private fleets rather than one public fleet. They invented the “Maona” in anticipation of the more modern “India Company”, to which the Genoese entrust the management of areas of significant strategic and economic interest. It is a Maona that guarantees the long duration of the domain of Chios, with its monopoly of alum, until 1566. Private instance gets stronger over time to the point that, after 1453, when the Turks settled in Constantinople, there’s an organization of private character born out of the public debt – the bank of San Giorgio – increasingly controlled by large families and a constant financier of the city – to manage the strategic areas considered at risk, such as the Black Sea.

It is important to note that the strategy used by the Genoese to extend their control over neighboring areas is identical to that used internationally. The Genoese are ancient warriors in an age of feudal models and prefer to describe themselves as such. However, their wars against the Empire and against the feudal powers are inferior to the matrimonial pacts, conventions

that equally guarantee progressive control of the coast and the Apennines. On the other hand is their interest in control of strategic points. So the rule of Genoa in the territory will never be total. In fact very wide areas continue to be in the hands of large feudal clans Fieschi, Spinola Doria, Grimaldi and later Fregoso and Adorno, however, all are immersed in the political and economic life of the city. The Commune only prefer the control of the communication routes and landings. Rarely shall there be forced settlements such as Portovenere or a foundation like Chiavari. Simultaneously and with similar systems, we move over the Tyrrhenian islands and the Mediterranean. Even in this case the action always oscillates between private and public. Corsica is an essential breakwater to the port of Genoa. During the thirteenth century, after a bitter struggle with Pisa, Genoa arrived to control the entire island and filled it with towers, completing acts of forced population. Also Sardinia is partly controlled. The family of Doria with the support of the Empire, try to create there a kingdom controlled by the Genoese. The iron of Elba will also be controlled by them, and in the Norman period to the modern age have advanced trading posts and hundreds of estates in southern Italy and Sicily.

The private and public records, the chronicles of Byzantine, Arabs and Europeans recount of Genoese presence in all the Syrian Palestinian territories that the Europeans acquired in the decade of the First Crusade, from the taking of Antioch in 1098 to Tripoli in Syria, the current Lebanon (1109). Thirty houses, a church, a warehouse, a landing, an oven, a bathroom and farmhouses in the countryside form the settlement pattern in this area to Arsuf, Cesarea, Tyre, Beirut, Acre, but there is also the dominion of Byblos-Jbeil obtained by the hero of the conquest of Jerusalem and Cesarea, Guglielmo Embriaco for a branch of his family. So already this first phase of overseas expansion has a very different model in an area that the Genoese will soon monopolize in spite of Pisans and Venetians.

In these areas their action lasts as long as the European presence, that is, until the fall of Acre in 1291. However then they have already spread their network to Cyprus and Constantinople, where the Tower of Galata still dominates the centre of the district of Pera, where from 1261 one of their "podestà" governs. In that year, in alliance with the dynasty of the exiled Greek Paleologi, they demolished the Latin-Venetian Empire which lasted from 1204 and they monopolize the Black Sea, an important strategic area for its access routes to the Orient, and where they will be present for more than two centuries. Thanks to the skill of one of the most important figures in their history, Benedetto Zaccaria, they put the hands on the mastic of Chios and on the alum of Focea and arrive to Flanders.

In the Black Sea, Amastri, Sinope, Samsun, Savastopoli, Vicina, Kilia, Licostomo, Tana Maurocastro Vosporo Balaclava, Soldaia, Matrega, and especially the main center of Caffa in the Crimea, are perfectly organized on the model from Genoa with consulates, magistrates,

offices and statutes. In the fifteenth century it is really interesting to compare Pera, Caffa and Chios (run by the Maona) and also see the different nuances of urban models and urban development.

Unlike the Venetians, the Genoese always had good relations with the Turks. When Constantinople fell under Turkish rule, Pera doesn't sustain too much damage. Only two years before the sultan had renewed agreements with Perot, the Maonesi of Chios and Gattilusio of Lesbos. The Genoese continue to enjoy liberty, property and free trade throughout the Turkish Empire albeit now with the payment of duties. As confirmed by the contracts drawn up locally by Genoese notaries, life continues and there is a substantial movement of ships. Members of large families are often present in Pera, where Francis Draper, adviser to Muhammad II, and his son Thomas Spinola have a house. Caffa will fall in 1475, but Chios, albeit constrained by the Sublime Porte, will stand until 1566, guaranteeing the Genoese trade with the great Ottoman Empire. In the early fourteenth century there are many Genoese in Kiev, Poland, Hungary and Georgia. They are "podestà" and contractors of salt mines. Simone Doria is admiral of the Hungarian crown. The Genoese trade in the Azov and Caspian Seas. Genoese and Ligurians circulate throughout the African coast, and particularly in Egypt but also in Tunisia, Ceuta and Atlantic Morocco.

Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when Islamic Middle East instability is counterbalanced by the great, peaceful Mongol empire which will last about a century, on the various routes of the Silk Road many Genoese depart from the Black Sea to the Middle and Far East, to its wealth, its spices and its gems. They have a consulate in Tabriz in Persia. The Genoese Pope Innocent IV Fieschi, ushering in a wider policy of the Roman Church, sent Giovanni da Pian del Carpine to his first post in the East. China is a magnet for an expanding European market. Merchants, diplomats and missionaries followed John Montecorvino, the first bishop in Beijing, there will be after him, Andrew of Perugia, William of Rubrouk, Odorico da Pordenone, and the most famous of all, the Venetian Marco Polo. The Genoese Illioni will leave their beautiful tombs. The manual of the Florentine merchant Francesco di Balduccio Pegolotti recalls that anything to do with trading with China you follow the rules of the Genoese and Giovanni Boccaccio in his famous "Decameron" defines them as the leading experts in things Chinese.

The historiography has often insisted that the fall of Acre and the end of peace in Mongolia push for a projection to the European West. But this is not true. For some time the attention of the Genovese clan has been magnetized in that direction.

In fact, between 1110 and 1112, the Genoese are already working on the Atlantic coast of

Galicia, where they build ships for the bishop of Compostela against the raids of the Saracens and Normans. Shortly after they are found in Safi, Morocco on the Atlantic coast, where the African caravans terminate and where the gold arrives. A series of treaties and deeds testify as early as the twelfth century, to relations with all Muslim rulers in the area.

They have trading posts with scribes who take note also in arabic of the trade in the Maghreb and their neighborhoods in Seville and Lisbon. In this age when war seems to be the backbone of the history of the eastern Mediterranean, the admired and friendly words of the Arabs demonstrate the kindness with which Islam in the Western Mediterranean regard these warrior-merchants. Moreover, the Genoese know that the western Mediterranean is their strong point. Goods arrive here from the great Islamic empire, and there is the strait that is the door to the Atlantic.

From the twelfth century the Genoese were also present in market areas on the coast of Provence, for example in Saint-Gilles, and were well connected to local powers against the possible emergence of competing Communes similar to their neighbors Savona and Ventimiglia. In 1127 they sign favorable trade agreements with the Count of Barcelona. In the mid-forties they prefer to ignore the second overseas Crusade and devote themselves to an operation in Hispanic Almeria and Tortosa, where, in 1146-47, while failing to establish a system similar to the Middle East, they obtained, however, much plunder. Then there was the birth of the system of 'Compere', where members or clans, that finance the ordinary and extraordinary enterprises of the city, pay interest with "Compere" – i.e. the transfer of revenue from indirect taxes – of which there are shares. In time it will create the impressive system that, in 1407, with its consolidation led to the creation of the Bank of San Giorgio, the guarantee of survival of the town, the preferred place of investment by the Genoese and more or less important Ligurians, destined for centuries to be Europe's first safe.

In the operating system of the Genoese close links with the Burgundian axis, Norman, Occitan, Hispanic and French were not at odds with the privileged trading posts on the Moroccan coast from Ceuta to Safi and Saleh and on the Maghreb, from Bugia, Tunis, Oran, Tripoli, Libya to Egypt. The Genoese were already present in Lisbon, Cadiz, Seville, Andalusia and the Algarve in the Islamic age, the concessions of the Emir in Valencia, in Denia and Majorca, the construction of a monopoly over trade and policy will remain constant for more than half of the thirteenth century, when Pisa falls and grow to the more powerful Crown of Aragon and the no less dangerous Crown of Anjou.

The border in the East is unstable, it expands or recedes only in relation to issues of confrontation and conflict with Islam. The West is a different matter. The boundaries of the world can advance there and not to the East, where they acquire and lose areas of trade and

life.

The future lies in the west. Also the Church of Rome, accompanied by new instances of crusades and missions on this long journey. They are Ligurian, the popes present for the highlights of this expansive process. After Innocent IV, who moved his men to the East and Morocco, in the fifteenth century there is Nicholas V, Sixtus IV, Innocent VIII, Julius II, watch these Genoese carefully, who first with the Portuguese and then with the Castilians, beat the relentless waves of the Atlantic before sailing to the New World.

Between the thirteenth and fourteenth century, when the balance of payments is in favor of the West and in 1251 a return to the gold coin minting in Genoa and Florence, the fall of Acre and the end of Mongol peace push in favor of a projection to the European West.

In May 1291 the brothers Ugolino and Vadin Vivaldi, accompanied by Franciscan friars, leave on the galleons, “Allegranza” and “Sant’Antonio”, armed by Tedisio Doria, heading for Indian parts. At that time, Vivaldi, like many other important families of Genoa, had already been a stable presence in Lisbon. Evidently, even for his contemporaries the company has great importance even the official chronicle of Genoa mentions it. But, at the height of the Canary Islands the shipment is swallowed up into nothing and isn’t heard of again (although it seems that just a few years later Sorleone Doria met a descendant of Vivaldi at the mouth of the Gambia).

The story of Vivaldi is an important testimony of the policy of expansion in the Atlantic in which the admirals and Genoese warrior-merchants, along with the Portuguese are already protagonists. It shows, at the end of the thirteenth century, Benedetto Zaccaria, who, balancing his time between East and West, brings between 1277 and 1278 the Mediterranean ships which sailed to Flanders and the North. Even more is proved by the act of 1317 with which Dom Dinis of Portugal chooses Genoese Manuel Pessagno as the first Admiral of the Portuguese Crown. All this happens while in Tunis, in front of the notary Pietro Battifoglio, stretches an intense sequence of business, Ceuta struggles between the Genoese and Jewish religious themes and the Iberian Peninsula is already teeming with Genoese and Ligurians. The name Lanzarotto Malocello, is famous. This descendant of an ancient lineage, master of lands in Liguria and ships and a writer, between 1338 and 1339, discovered or rediscovered the Canaries, as illustrated by the Genoese flag drawn on the maps of time – and the name of the island – Lanzarote. Giovanni Boccaccio, the son of a merchant, wrote a small work on the trip that the Ligurian Nicolò da Recco performed with the Florentine Tegghia of Corbizzi to the Canary Islands in 1341. The story of “discoveries” will continue in the fifteenth century.

A century later in a letter written to his investors, December 12 1455, Antoniotto Usodimare describes his journey to the mouth of the Gambia. Antoniotto goes in search of African gold, also searching, on behalf of the powerful Centurion bank is Antonio Malfante. With Malfante is a letter, sent to a relative Giangiacomo Maineri on his journey to the Saharan oasis of Tuat in 1447, an area the Genoese already had certain knowledge of in the thirteenth century.

A merchant of sugar and slaves, Antonio da Noli, member of a family of cartographers, who left Genoa in 1461, along with a brother and a nephew, he became the Governor of Cape Verde in the Atlantic archipelago, which he in part discovered. He died there in 1497, leaving a female heir, after fluctuating between the Portuguese and Castilian crowns, in an interesting analogy of behavior with Columbus, Vespucci and the two Cabots. Between 1480 and 1492, Francis de Riberol (Rivarola), who invests money in the first Colombo voyage with other Genoese, finances, along with Galician Alonso de Lugo, the Castilian conquest of the Canary Islands, obtaining land later dedicated to the cultivation of sugarcane and the monopoly of "oricello" (purple dye). His brother Cosma traded a lot in sugar and slaves from Cadiz, between the Canaries and Spain. Also in Madeira, where the governor, the conqueror of Machico, Tristao Vaz of Teixeira, had a Genoese son-in-law, everything relating to sugar and its manufacture is in the hands of some of the main families of Genoa. Genoese families also have the monopoly of Portuguese cork and later Tabarchini coral. All names that we find in America. The Savonese Michele de Cuneo wrote to his friend Gerolamo Aimari of the return from the second trip made together with their other friend, Columbus, a letter that looks like a little manual for the merchants. Many of them Ligurians who go with Columbus.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 (the Genoese held Caffa on the Black Sea until 1475 and Chios until 1566) strengthens the incentive to seek new ways to reach the rich land of the East and a commitment to push back the frontier further to the extreme West Europe. Because of this they continue to consolidate the collaborative process between princes and merchants that has been taking place since the eleventh century. And once again the Genoese are the only ones able to offer capital, ships and fit men, technicians able to enter in every phase of operations.

Moreover in the Middle Ages and early modern ages the Genovese usually supplied ships and men to many European crowns. The Genoese and Ligurian Admirals constitute a chapter in the maritime world of the past. It's a fact that these Genoese admirals, from Benedetto Zaccaria to Andrea Doria, are excellent strategists used to the fighting between the islands of the Tyrrhenian. In the thirteenth century, among the Genoese admirals available to Castille, as well as an uncertain Ramon Bonifaz, who built the arsenal of Seville and Ugo Vento, who

in 1264, built four ships in Portovenere for the Crown, there is Zaccaria and later Egidio Boccanegra. Zaccaria has already acted as maritime control in the eastern Mediterranean for the Byzantines, won the battle of Meloria (1284) and later become an admiral for the French Crown for which he will study the first proposed continental blockade of England.

The Emperor Frederick II wants Genoese admirals and collaborators, among them, as well as Guglielmo Grasso, Guglielmo Porco there is also the famous Enrico of Volta, Count of Malta, sung by the troubadours as the “star of the Genoese” and there are Nicolino Spinola and Ansaldo de Mari. Saint Louis IX, King of France, goes on a crusade with two Genoese admirals, Giacomo da Levanto e Ugo Lercari. In addition to Benedetto Zaccariat also Ranieri Grimaldi and Aitone Doria are admirals of the French crown. Simone Doria is admiral of the Hungarian Crown. The “dynasty” of the Doria family includes many admirals among its ranks – such as Corrado who fought at Meloria, like Lamba, who defeated the Venetians in Curzola (Korčula). And then, of course, there is Columbus.

Western Europe is full of Genoese. Guglielmo Boccanegra built the port of Aigues Mortes for Louis IX of France. In 1295 Philip IV of France called upon the Genoese to prepare an arsenal, which is the Clos de Galées of Rouen. In Bruges, the Genoese have a strong presence, a lodge with the emblem of St. George, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, while some families “old” and “new” have their neighborhoods at their disposal. All would then be merged into Antwerp demonstrating the depth and constancy of a long-term relationship. The Genoese presence in Southampton and London dates back to at least 1303.

In the Iberian peninsula and in particular in the hispanic area, between the Mediterranean people Genoese there is a unique example of commitment and continuity and duration of their presence. Certainly not lacking, especially in the age of Columbus, are Florentine, Milanese and Piacenza businessmen and Florentine and Venetian ships sailing in Atlantic waters to the north of Europe. But, as has already happened in Portugal, the Genoese were the only ones to provide a rich range of skills and not only deal in goods or money. The partnership between the Genoese and Spanish is an important issue for the complexity and depth of a relationship of long duration and is one of the great themes of international history.

Divided into various kingdoms, always engaged in skirmishes with Islam and in their internal wars, the Spanish area generally presents itself as an ideal area of investment for the Genoese, who have been in Andalucia since the Islamic age and soon go into competition with the Jews (the traditional lenders to the Castilian Crown) and nor are specialists in “asientos”, and loans of capital and ships that distinguish them from contemporary merchants. During the twelfth century within the Spanish area they have created different political and economic areas. The Andalucian Islamic enclave centred only on Granada, from the middle of the

thirteenth century, kept alive by Malaga and the excellent links through the area from Morocco and the Maghreb. In the rest of the territory, in addition to Navarre, there are two dominant Spanish crowns destined to have a dominant role at an international level: the Crown of Castile and Leon, intent on reconquering the interior areas and the Crown of Aragon, where the markets and ports of Barcelona and Valencia are growing, and is therefore destined to clash with Genoa.

While relentlessly continuing to trade with Andalusia, the Genoese, however, even privately, are an active part of the “colonization”, which, in the mid-thirteenth century leads the Castilian monarchy to control some cornerstones of al-Andalus from Córdoba and Seville to Cadiz. And here they engineer their presence receiving, as evidenced by the “Book of Privileges” obtained by the Crown after the conquest of Seville in 1251, such treatment of a privileged “nation” even when other merchants – from Florence, Piacenza and Milan – present themselves in the same scene.

The Castilian testimony, along with the rich documentation of Genoa, confirms the strength of relationships based on a broad-spectrum collaboration: they lend money and manage assets, they contract out tax services, manage private and public accounting, enter into a game of civil and religious positions when some member of the family decides to leave Genoa forever. Seville is full of Genoese, known or unknown, two centuries before it became the “gateway to the Indies” when as many as 21 of its 28 “alberghi” will be represented by them. The same goes for Cordoba, Cadiz, Jerez de la Frontera and other, more or less important, places. They strengthen like this – but it is just one example – successful relationships with the great lords of Andalusia, the Medinaceli and Medina Sidonia, who control well – populated land, whiting and tuna nets, production of olive oil and shipping, and look carefully at the Atlantic experiments, large and small trade, transactions with greater or lesser financial commitment, coming and going of sailors and artisans, who often stop in that area full of opportunities. The Genoese “nation” in Seville, with its own neighborhood, its “Book of Privileges” and its traditions, has a long history. The Genoese Christopher Columbus set sail from these areas. Christopher Columbus, the man who will take the Genoese model outside Europe.