

**EXPLOITING THE SEA'S FULL POTENTIAL:  
Versatile merchant entrepreneurs connecting the Mediterranean in the  
seventeenth century**

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In this paper, I will analyse some relevant factors that may shed light on how certain Mediterranean commercial firms operated within the maritime economy during the first half of the seventeenth century. The major global changes that occurred during this period profoundly affected the “men of the sea”: the rise of the Atlantic ports, the “invasion” of English and Dutch ships and the intense maritime conflicts of the Thirty Years War are just some obstacles faced by those who used the sea as a channel for business activities and as an information conduit.

Based on a case study of the commercial companies of the Genoa-based Milanese Cernezzi and Odescalchi families (San Ruperto: 2017), I will analyse firstly, the chartering of English ships and, to a lesser extent, Dutch ones. Secondly, I will examine the uses of different European governments’ galleys for private and commercial purposes (even though in some cases this was prohibited). And, lastly, I will discuss the ideas held by some business men in imagining a shared, heterogeneous and plural sea.

I have been able to achieve these three goals by studying the commercial correspondence of the Cernezzi and Odescalchi (C&O) families’ firms.<sup>1</sup> The companies started operations in the late sixteenth century and expanded over the first third of the seventeenth century. They opened branch offices in Genoa (1590), Valencia (1604), Nuremberg (1604), and Venice (1619). Theirs was a nonspecialist company that was principally responsible for distributing goods in the most attractive markets. It focused on the distribution of textile manufactures (mainly wool and silk), trade in wheat between the hungry ports of the Mediterranean, and transport silver from Spain to Italy (San Ruperto, 2016: 41-74). Their networks expanded to connect multiple global ports:

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<sup>1</sup> This work is based in documents from different achivies: Archivio di Stato di Roma (ASRo), *Fondo Odescalchi*. ASRo, *Fondo Odescalchi Bracciano*. Archivio Raimondi-Mandica-Odescalchi di Como (ARMOCo), *Fondo Odescalchi*. Archivo General de Simancas (AGS), *Estado*. Archivio de la Corona de Aragón (ACA), *Consejo de Aragón*.

from Mexico to Seville, from Naples to Marseille, and from Tabarka to Amsterdam. There is an exceptional collection of documentary sources from the companies; I have analysed 3,466 of the firm's commercial letters to date. In interrogating these primary sources, I asked: What kind of boats did their companies charter to transfer its merchandise and the merchandise of their clients? With which "nation" were these vessels affiliated, and what were the requirements for chartering them? Lastly, I ask how this company reach to reduce cost of transaction in charter and select the best available vessels.

I will begin with some context. Over the course of history, the development of maritime trade in the Mediterranean led to the creation of powerful maritime industries in different ports. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, one of the hegemonic powers in this regard was the Republic of Venice, but in the Western Mediterranean there were also Ragusan, Genoese and Hispanic vessels. In the seventeenth century, the northern maritime industry began to build lighter and more economical vessels that could travel faster and more safely over long distances. Boats flying the flags of North Sea countries in the Mediterranean Sea from the 1600s became a growing reality, and the volume of business being carried out also grew (Braudel, 1956; Grendi, 1987; Fusaro, 2008). Although this arrival on the scene has been studied in depth and it is possible to link it to a progressive triumph over routes toward the East—which were mainly worked by Dutch and English agents—in recent decades some aspects of this development have been reconsidered. The historiography has reflected on collaboration and integration in certain contexts in which the new networks of Atlantic agents obtained market share using the preexisting nodes controlled by the Mediterranean agents (Fusaro-Heywood, 2010; Fusaro, 2012 :701-718).

Beyond the great ships, many English and Dutch maritime entrepreneurs became established, as Edoardo Grendi noted, in the Mediterranean and offered inter-Mediterranean transportation services. In other words, the partial substitution of Mediterranean ships with northern ones did not represent a total displacement of Mediterraneans' business and capital. Grendi indicated the need to study the "mediterraneizzazione" della navigazione nordica per Genova," (Grendi, 1987) and in fact some of the vessels that I have studied demonstrate this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the northern presence in the Mediterranean was viewed with concern by the Hispanic ambassadors sent to Genoa. We are offered a good illustration of this by Philip III's ambassador in the Ligurian capital, Juan Vivas de Cañamás. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, he pointed out that in Genoa “sienten mucho las naçiones del norte se bayan apoderando deste mar y que llevan tan grande suma de dinero como llevan”.<sup>2</sup> They imported, the in words of Fernando de Borja, “mercadurías de enemigos y hereges” as well as from “infieles”.<sup>3</sup> However, a distinction should be drawn between the discourses emanating from public agents and the actions of the Mediterranean “hombres de negocios” or entrepreneurs, who used northern ships during the period. The heterogeneity that existed in practice at sea was at odds with the interests attached to warring powers or to cities that changed their religious or political affiliations over time. Political and religious upheaval was especially intense from the end of the Twelve Years' Truce between the Hispanic Monarchy and the United Provinces and from the beginning of the Thirty Years War (Israel, 1996: 39-48).

In addition, we must take precautions when analysing the documentary sources on maritime trade. Generally speaking, port records contain details of the origin of each vessel according to its flag (Castillo, 1967; Salvador, 1971; Grendi, 1987), but the ships of the seventeenth century were spaces where multiple “national” realities converged. One example among the many contained in commercial letters sheds light on the complexity of relations within vessels.

In January 1643, C&O hired an English vessel to transport a consignment of wheat from Apulia in Southern Italy to Genoa. The cereal was distributed between Liguria, Provence and Lombardy, and the contracting party was Juan Méndez Henríquez of Naples, who hired C&O to manage the operation from Genoa. Taking advantage of the opportunity, C&O offered a portion of the hold to one of its clients, Giovanni Toffetti, a Milanese who loaded it with goods to be taken from the south to Milan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> AGS, *Estado*, Leg. 1434, 16. Letter written by Juan Vivas de Cañamas, Philip III's ambassador, to the King. 1607, 12 march.

<sup>3</sup> ACA, *Consejo de Aragón*, Llig. 74, n.3. Letter written by Fernando de Borja to the Aragon Council. 1604, 26 of march.

<sup>4</sup> ASRo, *FO*, II D 4. Different letters from January to April.

The Antwerp-based insurance firm Groot asked for 6 per cent of the value of the articles for its services, but ultimately the Dutch company Van Axel,<sup>5</sup> which had an insurance office in Venice, made a more attractive offer and provided insurance.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that the ship had a captain identified with the “English nation,” the goods, merchants and insurers belonged to other “nations.” The Cernezzi and Odescalchi families would seek to reduce the costs of their transactions. To this end, they took decisions that involved activating the dense network of transnational contacts that operated across borders to obtain the best information (Granovetter, 1973:1360-1380; Imízcoz, 2011: 98-138; Lamikiz, 2017: 40-60;). Their reputation, confidence mechanisms and maritime experience allowed them to choose who to work with (San Ruperto, 2017b: 415-439). Their consolidation as vessels charterers depended on their financial capacity in the major European centres.

Table. 1. *1643 maritime operation directed by Cernezzi & Odescalchi from Genoa*



The use of Englishmen’s and Dutchmen’s private vessels served them well in the reconfiguration of the Mediterranean maritime space. The maritime route was

<sup>5</sup> The firm was composed by Stefano van Naste and Francesco Van Axel. (Van Gelder, 2007: p. 177).

<sup>6</sup> ASRo, *FO*, II D 4. Letter written by Cernezzi & Odescalchi in Genoa to Venice. 1643, 23 January.

English, but it was not always the case that interests in ships' holds were. In a letter sent in 1639 from Genoa to Lisbon, their agent was asked to load the requested goods on any ships he considered appropriate, regardless of the nation of origin: "Et le robe havesti di inviare le indirizzate qui [a Genova] o a Livorno, [...], con le occasioni si offerirano di nave inglese, amborghese o d'altre nationi secondo a voi parerà a proposito, con darne avviso."<sup>7</sup>

Those examples show a practice that involved a fluid link between the different contracting and chartering parties, without there being divisions among subjects due to their religious or political/territorial affiliations. Although there was a large body of legal literature against these contracts—for example, Gregory XV's 1622 prohibition on trading with "heretics" (Zunckel, 2007: 231-256), and the warning from the different Hispanic ambassadors—the practice was based on great nuances that went beyond the captain of the vessel.<sup>8</sup>

In addition existed a trust phenomenon between the firm and some Captain's vessel. From Genoa to England, some captains don't have accurately orders to download merchandise in an specific port. C&O used "free" contracts that had no destination port for goods such as wheat. Cereal could be loaded in Cagliari (Sardinia) with its sale envisaged at the port that was most appropriate based on where the ship was going.<sup>9</sup> This also happens with other destinations in the English vessels routes. Depending on the market studies supervised from Genoa, the order ended up falling to the different agents of the major ports. Also, captains often loaded a ship without levying a freight charge, because they feel trustworthy in Cernezzini and Odescalchi network that would end up paying at the port they would indicate.<sup>10</sup>

I will now turn to other types of vessel. I would like to focus on the use of galleys built for the king of Spain and Genovese's galleys contracted by the monarch. Despite their defensive function and their role in transferring silver, these were also used for commercial transportation, a matter that has scarcely been studied. During the

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<sup>7</sup> ASRo, FO, FO, II D 3. 1639, 8 October.

<sup>8</sup> AGS, *Estado*, Leg. 1434, 16. AGS, *Estado*, Leg. 141, 29.

<sup>9</sup> ASRo, FO, II D 4. 1643, 11 April. *Letter written by C&O from Genoa to Giovanni Zeffi from Livorno.*

<sup>10</sup> ASRo, *Fondo Odescalchi Bracciano*, XXXIIF2. ASRo, FO, IID3, IID4.

seventeenth century, in the docks of the ports of Barcelona and Genoa serious financing problems developed in relation to the military fleets of the two powers. The cost of these vessels is currently the subject of debate among historians, whose focus falls upon public spending and the feasibility of constructing these ships. For governments, galleys were a military and security investment, and they also served to reduce transaction costs for private parties through their role as defenders of Hispanic interests in the Mediterranean (Braudel, 1955; Lo Basso, 2003; Lomas, 2015: 147-158). It is interesting to note that the high costs were recovered, in some cases, through hiring out part of the hold for commercial purposes, despite the fact that in the Hispanic case, for example, this practice was not always allowed, or in fact prohibited.

I have identified many examples of this practice in different years. In 1622, “capitano le galere di Spagna che si trovano in Denia, procuraremo ricevere le case dette tabini hanno caricato a essi signori Odescalchi di Genova”<sup>11</sup>, and “gionsero qua a salvamento Iddio laudatto le galere di Siviglia della Capitana, della qualle si ricevuto la cassa velli di Bolgona.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless between 1635 and 1643, hostilities among states -particularly French and Spain - complicated the war at sea. Hispanic galleys, as well as Genoese ones hired by Philip IV, had to focus on maritime defence (Lo Basso, 2011, pp. 819-846). In spite of this, in the hardest years of the conflicts, some galleys continued to transport goods. In 1637, manufactures of wool and silk, books and diamonds were loaded onto galleys, with parties contracting directly with the captain or his servants. In 1639, in spite of the fact that the Duke of Tursi’s galleys had been hired for service in defence of the Monarchy, they were chartered to transport goods: “le galere del nolo di don Carlo Doria sopra quelle i signori Donghi di Genova hanno caricho una balla sete lombarde.”<sup>13</sup> They also transported silver from Barcelona to Genoa for other businessmen in those galleys. And in 1639, the galleys of Agostino Spinola, Grimaldi, the Duke of Tursi and Battista Serra were chartered to transport goods from Flanders and Livorno and textiles from Milan, as well as silver goods, damasks, letters and other items.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> ASRo, FO, X B 6. 1622, 29 May.

<sup>12</sup> ASRo, FO, X B 6. 1622, 2 June.

<sup>13</sup> ASRo, FO, X B 6. 1622, 2 June.

<sup>14</sup> ASRo, FO, II D 3. Different letters, 1639. An example: in 1639, 27th September, C&O chartered the Duke of Tursi's galley with 160.000 *reales*, of which a 20% were to the Duke.

Genoese, Hispanic, Neapolitan and Sicilian galleys were the most commonly used, but there were also contracts involving Savoyard, Maltese and English galleys.<sup>15</sup>

As I have pointed, one of the most common routes was Genoa to Barcelona. A fair proportion of the goods were unloaded in the Catalan capital, and letters on their way to Madrid and Valencia went through it. Conversely, in Barcelona galley holds were chartered to transport precious metals, based on the consideration that galleys' heavy artillery meant that they could defend themselves against possible attacks (Álvarez Nogal, 2007: 8-12).

Understandably, the extending of construction of galleys to “business families” such as the Dorias, Spínolas and Serras indicates diversity in terms of trade and a configuration of maritime itineraries (Álvarez Nogal, 2007: 8-12; Ben Yessef, 2013: 157-172). This demonstrates that galleys did not exclusively have a military purpose, an issue that creates opportunities for future studies.<sup>16</sup>

However, I would not like to suggest that such hiring and cooperation between different agents was exempt from maritime conflicts, despite the interest that historians have already shown in studying this area. Different naval powers' stopping of ships was a headache for C&O and many other Mediterranean agents. Hispanic, English and French forces alike attacked galleys, murdered or abducted crew members and seized goods (Braudel: 1955; Velasco, 2005; Candiano 2010). International mediation through consuls and representatives in different European courts was key in retrieving products, the loss of which was damaging to private interests.

Conflicts at sea were a real nuisance for C&O. In 1637, a ship from Amsterdam was attacked and the value of the interests held on it by some Mediterranean entrepreneurs that were clients of Cernezzi and Odescalchi, exceeded 80,000 escudos. In 1638, France attacked some Sicilian galleys, seizing three of them. C&O had a shipment from Barcelona to Genoa with a value of 20,000 Spanish *reales* on them.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, something carried on ships that was almost more important than goods could be lost: correspondence. Braudel pointed out that information was the most

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<sup>15</sup> ASRo, *FO*, II D 4. In 1643 a Maltese galley was chartered to transport different goods. ASRo, *FO*, II D 3. In 1639 it was used a galley of the Duke of Savoy to transport merchandise. ASRo, *FO*, XB6. In 1622 Corte Imperial, an agent of C&O company in Alicante, was boarding one English galley to Levant.

<sup>16</sup> The first results of the study shown how, as among the vessels chartered by the C & O, the galleys represented the percentage 16% to 18% (1622-1639).

<sup>17</sup> ASRo, *FO*, II D 3. Advertised in different letters from 1637 to 1638.

valuable asset of the Early Modern era. C&O were engaged in information distribution and therefore drafted originals of letters that were copied up to three times by the scribes they recruited. These letters were sent via different routes with the intention of making sure the information always reached its destination. A failure along one route would not mean that the chain of communication had been broken. A prime example here is the attack on the Hispanic fleet headed to Mexico, where C&O had an agent. An English convoy seized the fleet and with it one of the official documents sent to Mexico.<sup>18</sup> Anticipation of such setbacks had made them write other letters.

How they did reduce the risks? They sought to reduce them as far as possible, for example contracting insurance; even so, they did not always take out. On the one hand, some of their customers did not want to increase transaction costs, and they took risks if the goods were not really valuable. At other times, their analysis of maritime conflicts made them make decisions in response to the circumstances. Coastal trade routes were usually safer, and monitoring of the movements of galleys belonging to different “nations,” as well as warnings from agents located at major ports, in many cases prevented conflicts of this kind.

C&O sent warnings to European courts when a misfortune happened at sea in order to alleviate the harm caused, whether it was an act of aggression or a shipwreck. In addition, they handled the freeing of prisoners of war, seeking to ensure that their release would cost as little as possible for the company. Whereas war on land could provide an outlet for their economic activities by providing weapons and supplies for the army in the battlefronts in Catalonia, Lombardy and Austria,<sup>19</sup> maritime warfare was a real nuisance for them. For this reason, they tried to make rapid contact with their agents so that monarchs or their officials would release commercial goods, which theoretically fell outside of princes’ “national” interests. An example here is the attack by the Neapolitan navy on several Dutch ships, which directly affected the main Mediterranean commercial firms. Those in charge of the firm in Genoa wrote to their agent in Madrid to have the Spanish monarch remedy this burdensome situation.

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<sup>18</sup> ASRo, *FOB*, XXXIIF2, 1622, 5 March. "Vediamo che il primo navilio d'aviso per Nova Spagna fu preso di corsari. Manco male non vi fussero lettere per il signore Lopio per il Mexico che doverette haver mandato parte di esse lettere con il secondo".

<sup>19</sup> The firms of C&O were loaner to military defends of Spanish Monarchy and the Empire.



«Et adesso l'armata de Napoli con 20 gallere uscite del porto di Vado navegando verso ponente incontratesi con 10 nave che d'Amsterdam venivano per qui Livorno, Napoli et Venetia cariche di grani, droghe et d'altre mercantie. Le hanno combatute et presone nove et altra per essersi acceso il fuoco nella monitione si è del tutto persa in mare dicono siano di valore de scuti 7 in 800.000 e se bene qui in effetto non si servono interessati di somma di rilievo, netando il più alle piazze d'Amsterdam, Venetia, Napoli e Livorno, viene ad ogni modo [...] assai et a tutta questa citta per il pregiuditio del comerchio tanto di presente come **per l'havere si spera che S.M sij per remediare a tanto desordine perché altrimenti ne resulterebbe notabile incomodo a tutti che levati li traffichi di qui l'otio potrebbe causare inconvenienti grandi piaccia a N.S illuminare tutti et guardare de mal 'incontri**».<sup>20</sup>

The recruitment of consuls, the management of insurance and agreements signed with captains to recover the ships were part of the activities undertaken and risks run by firms of this type when they shipped goods.

In conclusion and, despite everything, we can say that C&O envisaged a more heterogeneous and more plural sea where there would be respect for diversity as they conducted business.

C&O, who were compelled to emigrate by their partners and the firm's economic needs, fulfilled the mission of managing their companies, but at the same time they also played a social role that facilitated a connection between the shores of the Mediterranean and other destinations. This activity encouraged truly supranational networks and successfully connected the Mediterranean market beyond European political structures and religious differences. Such infrastructure created a privileged place for these types of families of entrepreneurs who managed to control information and, at the same time, hold significant power that monarchs and princes took advantage of in calling on their services.

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<sup>20</sup> ASRo, *FO*, II D 3. 1637, 9 June.

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