

**Giuseppe Seche, *Un mare di mercanti. Il Mediterraneo tra Sardegna e Corona d'Aragona nel tardo Medioevo*, Rome, Viella, 2020, pp. 306.**

The volume dedicated by Giuseppe Seche to Sardinian trade in the late Middle Ages is one of those beautiful surprises that ruffles, in a beneficial and effective way, our certainties about the Mediterranean market of that time, starting from the city of Cagliari, the observatory that he chooses for this thorough work of research. Cagliari, as the author makes clear, was not marginal in the framework of the so-called “Mediterranean Commonwealth” of the fifteenth century (a vast space that encompassed much of the western Mediterranean); on the contrary, the city assumed a role of primary importance in the game of international trade, an import and export hub with trade from the Catalan coasts to the Balearics, from the Tyrrhenian Sea of the Kingdom of Naples to Sicily and all the way to the Levantine ports.

From the very first lines of the book, we follow the history of the city: first, daughter of the Pisan expansion; then, from the first two decades of the fourteenth century, part of the Aragonese possessions and component of the *ruta de las islas*, an insular route connecting Catalonia with the East. In this strategic area, the urban reality of Cagliari becomes a nodal element of exchange, *Cap e govern de tot lo Regne and porta de Spanya*, commercial heart and hinge between the axes of international trade. Thus a port with great development potential, a complementary set of assets built on a high degree of competence and rationalization; managed by a multitude of merchants, with the skill to use new accounting techniques and to exploit their know-how of registers, correspondence, bills of exchange; inserted in networks located in the main Mediterranean ports, composed of partners, relatives, friends “ready to guarantee logistical support and, if necessary, to follow the management of sales and transactions” (p. 14), in a framework of collaboration and reciprocity.

This history is illuminated as by a spotlight, thanks to the extraordinary series of documents the author was able to collect. It is a unique

heritage, not only local in character but, by nature, international, covering an area that extends from the vertex of Cagliari to the entire Catalan and Italian world. This is the set of documents from the archival collection of the Dessì family, conserved in the Archives of the Chapter of the Cathedral of Cagliari, in the city's Diocesan Historical Archives. This is a complex of sources consisting of hundreds of archival units, rediscovered in practice by Giuseppe Seche himself, who with a work of fine paleographic chiseling and interpretation of a difficult language like Catalan, brought them to light and reworked them with great philological acumen. As one readily imagines, the documents speak of many things: private topics, commercial information, prices, interlocutions. But precisely because all kinds of information can be useful for business, they also refer to political and international issues or report fundamental news on such ill-omened contingent aspects as famines, wars, pestilences. All factors which, in the perspective of contemporaries, had to serve to "build an updated picture of what was happening, so as to allow better planning of commercial and financial projects" (p. 33).

The result is an exemplary picture of Cagliari's mercantile society of the time, of its businessmen and its networks, which brings out the depth of their range of action, of their professional paths, of the social mobility and the fortunes of family members. Naturally the analysis focuses greatly on the Dessì family itself, developing all the substantial and conceptual components that define its strong commercial nature. A central, strong figure in this account is Julià Dessì, of whom Seche reconstructs, with an enormous capacity for detail, the whole family picture. A professional merchant, self-aware and proud of his status, with a well established role as citizen, so much so that, in 1454, he acted as arbiter in a dispute between colleagues, an aspect that in the author's words "allows us to hypothesize that at this date Dessì was an experienced figure with a good reputation in the world of commerce" (p. 75). The economic indications of the book do not stop at trade but go beyond it to penetrate the public context of public contracts, one of the major sources of income of the time, with awards ranging from the

Scrivania della beccheria to the role of receiver of the Marquisate of Oristano, a position that Julià Dessì was trying to obtain in order to collect tax rights. He was, in many ways, a progenitor, followed by a second generation equally attentive to trade, including his sons Antoni and Arnau, who continued the family tradition, perhaps with extra competence and acquired knowledge in the field of monetary exchange and financial practices, thanks, as Seche explains, to the new intellectual and cultural apparatus that the city of Cagliari had acquired.

The historical account is not limited to the Dessì family. The documentation examined lets us wander through countless names of remarkable merchants of Cagliari with a distinction that reflects many other areas of Italy. On the one hand there were the great businessmen, engaged in international trade; on the other hand, local merchants, whose business was conducted in a much narrower perimeter, limited to the typical outlets of the Sardinian economy, in the eternal mediation between the peripheral agro-pastoral areas and the urban regions. Among the former we must remember Samuel Bondia, exponent of the local Jewish community, with commercial interests turning on the sale of leather, whose space of action reached Campania, with a remarkable interchange and with the powerful support of the Jewish banker Abram de Volterra, "an indication of the inclusion of this Jewish merchant from Cagliari in the great network of Italian trade and credit, of which the family of bankers from Volterra was part" (p. 90). Naturally, however, the Cagliari market was not provisioned solely by local people. The perspective of the Dessì letters offers a broad panorama of Iberian merchants, people of Barcelona, Valencia, Majorca. Personages of the level of the Navarro family, who traded from Galicia to Sicily and extended their interests even to Flanders. Or Italians: Sicilians, Campanians, Ligurians, Tuscans and in particular, given the historical ties with Sardinia, Genoese and Pisans. Operators who created elastic family networks and commercial circuits, interchangeable and linked to larger interregional structures that "allowed business development in the overall economic context of the Crown of Aragon" (p. 110).

Nor does the scenario stop there. It continues with the description of transport, goods, production. The inland-sea dynamic typical of Sardinian trade is repeatedly resumed, with an analysis of transport planning that reveals a series of new elements pertaining to the complexity and articulation of the supply chain, with a composite system of labour ranging from the single transporter to associations capable of creating small transport caravans. The result is a landscape made up of shippers, dock workers, porters, drivers beset by the usual problems: the poor state of the wagons, the impracticable roads, the lack of suitable containers, bad weather, the death of beasts of burden. What we have is a sort of micro-history of distribution processes, in a narrative dimension that shifts from the inland context towards maritime transport, of which Seche investigates the many aspects, in the awareness that it required “much higher risk margins” and a “greater degree of planning” (p. 133). Cagliari, by its geographical position, was central between the routes that led to central-southern Italy and towards the Levant. A port full of ships of different sizes, dimensions and capacities, from *lley* to *balleneros* or to the more serviceable caravels and *naus*. The movement from the port was continuous, goods ceaselessly imported and exported, with the usual sequence typical of trade *de type colonial*: incoming, artifacts and in particular textiles; and outgoing, the products of Sardinia, the classics of an agricultural and pastoral economy, especially leather and wool, then horses, cattle, meat, cheese, grain, pasta.

At the end, the reader is left with the solid setting of a work *à part entière*, with a view that broadens from the particular towards the general, ultimately examining the entire commercial circuit, in an effort of synthesis that binds together the different aspects discussed earlier. With the addition of a new element that closes the circle of this complex system of Cagliari: namely a description of financial movements that were not based on an institutionalized system of credit but instead adopted, where necessary, informal networks capable of providing the funds for the individual transactions. For these matters, Seche warns,

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“the merchants used to turn to the members of the family network and the *bon amichs*” (p. 206). A primitive sort of network, perhaps, based on personal relationships and trust, but one which worked very well, considering the volume of trade, and which would appear to be one of the most original features of this Cagliari economy. However, this lively economy also made use of other financing instruments, with the signing of sureties or pledges, or maritime credit, maritime exchanges or bills of exchange, which as we know “guaranteed a profit thanks to the commissions applied, the interest rates and currency exchange rates” (p. 208).

Ultimately, the Cagliari observatory studied by Seche through the Dessì papers opens up a world of commerce that is in many ways new and fascinating, thanks in large measure to the clarity of presentation with which the author crafted the entire work, the sign of great interpretative and methodological effort. The volume offers a photograph of a large merchant class able to respond effectively to the requests of the international market and which had the great merit of instituting a virtuous circuit that included Sardinian products durably within the great world of fifteenth-century Mediterranean trade.

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