

# **Feudal Institutions and Rural Markets in North-Western Italy (Seventeenth-Eighteenth Centuries)\***

**Luciano Maffi**  
*University of Parma*  
**Andrea Zanini**  
*University of Genoa*

## ABSTRACT

The role of feudal lords in the development of trade and manufacturing in their fiefdoms is part of the debate on feudalism and its economic policies, as well as on market areas in rural communities in the early modern age. In this article, we want to present how some feudal lords were particularly dynamic and supported economic development. This occurred when certain favourable conditions existed, such as the location of the fiefdom within a wide road network, the availability of commercial products on site or in nearby areas, and the entrepreneurial initiative of the feudal landowners themselves. The case study is significant because it concerns a vast rural area of North-western Italy, characterised by the presence of several fiefdoms, located at the crossroads between the bordering pre-unification regional states: the Republic of Genoa, the Duchies of Savoy, Parma, and Milan. In general, we show that the feudal lord's intention was not to create the conditions to sell his annuities in kind but to develop markets that could generate other incomes. The success of this initiative stemmed from his ability to catalyse people from other areas. In this way, the lord could increase feudal income with the consequent positive externality of improving economic conditions.

---

\* An early version of this work was presented at the *Fourth Biennial Conference of the European Rural History Organisation* (Paris, 2019). We should thank participants at the session on *Rural Grain Markets in Early Modern Europe (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries)* and two anonymous referees of this journal for their comments and suggestions.

## Introduction

In recent years, the traditional topic of rural markets in the late medieval and early modern ages has aroused a renewed historiographical interest, as the growing international bibliography testifies. Current topics of discussion are the rise of new markets and fairs, as well as the effects they generated because of increased trade and agricultural production. Another issue is the development of the flow of goods in transit areas.

Considering the English case, Henry French further develops the classic theses of Richard Henry Tawney and Michael Postan.<sup>1</sup> Richard Hoyle, on the other hand, focuses on early modern economic and rural history, particularly land ownership, demonstrating how land tenure can also influence the dynamics of the development of agricultural markets in the countryside.<sup>2</sup> In general, these authors observe that social changes, changes concerning rural property, assistance systems in the countryside, and the role of landlords produced profound transformations able to positively influence markets, for example by stimulating their integration. Moreover, historiography has long studied market integration and fragmentation, finding political-administrative division to be an obstacle to trade, due to duties and tolls, which deter commerce. This would happen, for example, in areas characterized by a feudal system, often judged by historiography as backward and not very inclined to attract trade and investment flows.<sup>3</sup> On the subject of integration, historians have

---

<sup>1</sup> H. French and R. Hoyle, *The character of English rural society*, Manchester, 2013; *Iid*, "English Individualism refuted and reasserted: the land market of Earls Colne (Essex), 1550-1750", in *The Economic History Review*, no. 56, 2003, pp. 595-622; *Iid*, "The land market of a Pennine manor: Slaidburn, 1650-1780", in *Continuity and Change*, no. 14, 1999, pp. 349-383.

<sup>2</sup> B.J.P. van Bavel and R. Hoyle (eds.), *Social relations, property and power*, Turnhout, 2010; R. Hoyle (ed.), *Custom, improvement and landscape in early modern Britain*, Farnham, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> M.M. Postan and J. Hatcher, "Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society", in *Past & Present*, no. 78, 1978, pp. 24-37; C.E. Searle, "Custom, Class Conflict and Agrarian Capitalism: The Cumbrian Customary Economy in the Eighteenth Century", in *Past & Present*, no. 110, 1986, pp. 106-133; R. Hilton, "Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism", in *History Workshop*, no. 1, 1976, pp. 9-25; R.J. Holton, "Marxist Theories of Social

highlighted how the formation of national or regional states supports the development and integration of internal markets.<sup>4</sup>

As for Italy, studies on feudality have primarily focused on institutional and political aspects and relations with neighbouring Italian states. In this regard, Cinzia Cremonini pointed out that feudality in some areas of the north of the peninsula enabled the creation of “semi-sovereign enclaves” where the feudatories often belonged to a “border nobility” because they were immersed in the dynamics of lands situated between one sovereignty and another.<sup>5</sup>

Blythe Alice Raviola, on the other hand, highlights the role of small states and underlines some of the limitations of this type of situation, while simultaneously pointing out how such a peculiar territorial size could favour a change in social and economic conditions thanks, for example, to activities related to transit trade.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, works by Paolo Pirillo, Simone Collavini, and Stefano Calonaci represent useful references to understand the similarities

---

Change and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism”, in *Theory and Society*, no. 10, 1981, pp. 833-867.

<sup>4</sup> K.H. O’ Rourke and J.G. Williamson, “When did globalisation begin?,” in *European Review of Economic History*, no. 6, 2002, pp. 23-50; *Ibid.*, “Once more: when did globalisation begin?,” in *European Review of Economic History*, no. 8, 2004, pp. 109-117; V.N. Bateman, “The evolution of markets in early modern Europe, 1350-1800: a study of wheat prices”, in *Economic History Review*, no. 64, 2011, pp. 447-471; *Ead.*, *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, London, 2012; A.J.S. Gibson and T.C. Smout, “Regional Prices and Market Regions: The Evolution of the Early Modern Scottish Grain Market”, in *The Economic History Review*, no. 48, 1995, pp. 258-282; R. Brenner, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism”, in *Past & Present*, no. 97, 1982, pp. 16-113; *Id.*, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe”, in *Past & Present*, no. 70, 1976, pp. 30-75; P. Croot and D. Parker, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development”, in *Past & Present*, no. 78, 1978, pp. 37-47.

<sup>5</sup> C. Cremonini, “Poteri mediatizzati: feudi pontifici e feudi imperiali. Alcune ipotesi di confronto”, in *Cheiron*, no. 2, 2016, pp. 282-289.

<sup>6</sup> B.A. Raviola, “Small States in Early Modern Italy: Definitions, Examples and Interactions”, in D. Bornstein, L. Gaffuri and B.J. Maxson (eds.), *Languages of Power in Italy (1300-1600)*, Turnhout, 2017, pp. 3-16; *Ead.*, “Piedmont as a composite state (ecclesiastic enclaves, fiefs, boundaries)”, in Matthew Vester (ed.), *Sabaudian studies: political culture, dynasty and territory, 1400-1700*, Kirksville, 2013, pp. 278-297; *Ead.*, “The imperial system in early modern northern Italy: a web of dukedoms, fiefs and enclaves along the Po”, in J.W. Evans and P.H. Wilson (eds.), *The holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806. A European perspective*, Leiden, 2012, pp. 217-236.

and differences with other areas of the peninsula that had a similar jurisdictional situation, dominated by fiefdoms that acted as connections between different political spaces.<sup>7</sup>

A specific feature of Italy, during the early modern period, was the coexistence of a plurality of feudal systems: besides the fiefdoms created by single state entities, there were supranational feudal systems, in particular, the imperial fiefdoms and the papal fiefdoms. These systems were frequently intertwined, creating jurisdictional intricacy, which often caused complex, lengthy legal disputes.<sup>8</sup>

Concerning imperial fiefdoms, they were dependent on the Holy Roman Empire and assigned to local lords and therefore independent from the pre-unification states until the end of the eighteenth century, thus increasing the political, legal, and institutional fragmentation.<sup>9</sup> In these lands, until the end of the Old Regime, the feudal lord held an important political role, which often led to jurisdictional conflicts with the regional states where the fiefdoms were inserted as real enclaves.<sup>10</sup> As a result, during the early modern age, states such as the Republic of Genoa and the Savoy Piedmont, which housed imperial fiefdoms, implemented strategies aimed at weakening the rights of the feudal lords, who only recognized the imperial power. This situation, however, did not necessarily hurt the local economy. Marco Battistoni noted that feudality and political fragmentation could be positive factors. Independence from neighbouring states fostered the development of fiefdoms' connective role

---

<sup>7</sup> P. Pirillo, "Signorie dell'Appennino tra Toscana ed Emilia-Romagna alla fine del Medioevo", in F. Cengarle, G. Chittolini and G.M. Varanini (eds.), *Poteri signorili e feudali nelle campagne dell'Italia settentrionale fra Tre e Quattrocento: fondamenti di legittimità e forme di esercizio*, Firenze, 2005, pp. 211-225; S. Collavini, "I signori rurali in Italia centrale (secoli XII- metà XIV): profilo sociale e forme di interazione", in *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Moyen Âge*, n. 123/2, pp. 301-318; S. Calonaci, *Lo spirito del dominio. Giustizia feudale e giurisdizionale nell'Italia moderna (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, Roma, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> K.O. von Aretin, "L'ordinamento feudale in Italia nel XVI e XVII secolo e le sue ripercussioni sulla politica europea. Un contributo alla storia del tardo feudalesimo in Europa", in *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, no. 4, 1978, pp. 51-94.

<sup>9</sup> M. Schnettger and M. Verga, *L'Impero e l'Italia nella prima età moderna*, Bologna, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> von Aretin, "L'ordinamento feudale in Italia".

within an economy characterized by transit trade and the presence of markets. In particular, the pluralistic and fragmented legal-institutional condition was crucial for their economic vitality. This particular condition allowed the creation of a network of 'privileged places', in fiscal terms at least.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, we want to demonstrate how some feudal lords supported local economies and trade initiatives during the modern age. This was possible where certain favourable preconditions existed, such as an effective road network, the availability of commercial products in other areas, and the willingness and financial initiative of the feudal landowners themselves. Anyway, preconditions were necessary, but alone they were not enough, because unless the feudal lord had entrepreneurial attitudes, the development process would not start. In this regard, in recent times, Scandinavian historiography has identified two opposing models of a feudal lord's conduct: the "irrational" and the "rational". The former corresponds to the feudal lord who intends to exploit all his prerogatives to extract the greatest possible wealth from the fiefdom, at the expense of his subjects. The latter, instead, is typical of the feudal lord who understands that his advantage is strongly linked to the living conditions of his subjects, towards whom he feels a moral and social responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

This "rational" approach of the feudal lord, who might support manufacturing and commercial initiatives, can be found in several imperial fiefdoms located in North-western Italy, in the Apennine area. Historiography has dealt with these areas thanks in particular to the studies of Angelo Torre, which focus precisely on the area between Liguria and Piedmont, but with a different approach.<sup>13</sup> Actu-

---

<sup>11</sup> M. Battistoni, "Feudi pontifici, fiscalità e transiti commerciali nel Piemonte del Settecento", in *Cheiron*, no. 2, 2016, pp. 64-88.

<sup>12</sup> P. Henningsen, *I sansernas vold. Bondekultur og kultursammanstød I enevældens Danmark*, Copenhagen, 2006, vol. 1, pp. 465-466; M. Dribe, M. Olsson, P. Svensson, "Was the manorial system an efficient insurance institution? Economic stress and demographic response in Sweden, 1749-1859", in *European Review of Economic History*, no. 16, 2012, p. 296.

<sup>13</sup> A. Torre, *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Age. Places*, London, 2020.

ally, Torre studies the concept of “locality”, which he defines as a place with one or more settlements that are connected by documented rituals and laws. He questions the idea of a natural organisation of the space in which long-term community bonds grew arguing that the structures of society are the result of continually negotiated practices to define borders.

In general, the fiefdoms analysed in this article do not have particularly notable agrarian potential, however, due to their location, they could be “suitable trading sites.”<sup>14</sup> Some relevant works on urbanisation have underlined the fundamental importance of agriculture in explaining the emergence of pre-industrial hamlets, given the high cost of transport.<sup>15</sup> In pre-industrial economies, both agriculture and transports were basic factors for the development of a settlement. The natural constraints in a pre-industrial economy explain why the position of villages and cities is determined by natural factors, such as fertile soil or trading sites. This article aims at underlining that the feudal lords played a vital role in this mechanism: by turning “suitable trading sites” into rural markets, they contributed to increasing feudal income, without raising taxes, and encouraged private economic activities, thus acting as “rational” feudal lords. This metamorphosis contributed to reducing transaction costs and promoting the development of communities or villages in the fiefdoms, as the case of Casella, in the Scrivia Valley, and San Sebastiano, in the Curone Valley, demonstrate.

The article is organised as follows: the next paragraph analyses the *Oltregiogo*, that is the wide area including the fiefdoms; then, the following two paragraphs consider the markets of Casella and San Sebastiano Curone, respectively; and finally, the last paragraph contains the conclusions.

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A.L. Cermeño, K. Enflo, “Can kings create towns that thrive? The long-term implications of new town foundations”, in *Journal of Urban Economics*, 112, 2019, pp. 50-69.

<sup>15</sup> P. Bairoch et al., *Cities and Economic Development*, Chicago, 1991; J. De Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500-1800*, London, 2006.

**FIGURE 1**  
Casella and San Sebastiano Curone in the context of North-Western Italy



Source: authors' elaboration based on a 1770s map by Matteo Vinzoni.

### The *Oltregiogo*: a “middle earth” at the crossroad of regional states

During the early modern age, the so-called *Oltregiogo* (from the Latin *ultra jugum*, which is beyond the mountain) was a macro-region in North-western Italy, crossed by a mountain range (the Apennines), and located at the intersection of several pre-unification Italian states: the Republic of Genoa, the Duchies of Savoy, Milan, and Parma.

Specifically, the *Oltregiogo* was a rural area, with a low urbanization ratio, and a particular settlement structure greatly influenced by its morphological features. In this respect, it is a largely mountainous and hilly territory, divided into several valleys, separated by impervious mountainous barriers, so each valley was a sort of an economic microcosm.<sup>16</sup> Within a territory strongly partitioned and

<sup>16</sup> F. Monteverde, *L'Oltregiogo: una terra strategica per l'Italia*, Genova, 2006.

conditioned by orographic conformation, the villages situated along the main transit routes could acquire a key role as market centres, able to serve a vast surrounding area. Furthermore, thanks to the geographic location, and the presence of important transport routes linking the Ligurian Sea with the Po Valley, the *Oltregiogo* has always represented a sort of “middle earth”, crucial for trade between the coast and the hinterland.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the spatial framework adopted in this article is not a local or a national dimension, but a regional dimension, in which the “region” is an area with some homogeneous characteristics -, in this case geographic and orographic – and without a political unity, which represents a useful observation point to analyze the emergence of new economic relationships between territories.<sup>18</sup>

From a geopolitical point of view, the *Oltregiogo* was politically fragmented because it was characterized by the presence of several fiefs, most of them depending on the Holy Roman Empire, and thus completely outside the authority of the neighbouring countries. Though feudalism had its apogee in the Middle Ages, it should be remembered that in many parts of Europe it survived longer. In the Italian case, even if serfdom had substantially disappeared, several elements of continuity with medieval feudalism persisted, especially in the economic sphere.<sup>19</sup> Over time, its characteristics changed, but the feudatory remained the lord of a microstate, which retained various prerogatives, such as the administration of justice, legislative and fiscal power, and the right to control the economic life of their fiefs and subjects. In other words, he held both political and economic power.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> L. Piccinno, *I trasporti in Liguria all'inizio dell'Ottocento. Nuove dimensioni e modelli operative*, Milano, 2013, pp. 107-123. On the importance of this area for trade flows, see O. Raggio, *Feuds and State Formation, 1550-1700. The Backcountry of the Republic of Genoa*, Cham, 2018, pp. 162-68; F. Costantini, “Commercio e contrabbando di cereali in area lombarda tra Seicento e Settecento”, in S.A. Conca Messina and B.A. Raviola (eds.), *Le vie del cibo. Italia settentrionale (secc. XVI-XX)*, Roma, 2019, pp. 175-189.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. R.P. Corritore, “Il processo di “ruralizzazione” in Italia nei secoli XVII-XVIII. Verso una regionalizzazione”, in *Rivista di Storia economica*, n. 10, 1993, p. 374.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. Fasoli, “Feudo e castello”, in *Storia d'Italia*, vol. 1, I documenti, Torino, 1973, pp. 261-308, 305.

<sup>20</sup> R. Ago, *La feudalità in età moderna*, Roma-Bari, 1998; A. Musi, *Il feudalesimo nell'Europa*

As regards the *Oltregiogo*, during the early modern age, many fiefdoms were held by ancient and powerful Genoese families, in particular the Dorias, the Fieschis, and the Spinolas.<sup>21</sup> In most cases, fiefdoms stretched along the slopes of the Apennines; therefore, their territory was mostly mountainous and hilly, less suitable for the cultivation of cereals, and more generally, commercial crops, except for wine. Therefore, unlike flat areas, agriculture did not represent the most relevant feudal income. Consequently, when local landlords strove to improve their rents, they tended to capitalize on other factors, namely their seigneurial privileges and prerogatives, which gave them the right to regulate every aspect of the economic and social life of their subjects. This induced them to impose and enforce feudal monopolies of the mill, the wine press, the oven, etc., by forbidding the construction or use of private ones, and facilities outside the feudal jurisdiction.<sup>22</sup>

Obviously, the feudatory had to carefully balance such interventions as they could negatively affect the relationship with his subjects, exacerbating the extractive nature of feudal institutions. Consequently, many Genoese feudal lords tried to overcome this problem by leveraging on their spirit of initiative to find other ways to increase feudal rents. Some of them decided to establish small-

---

*moderna*, Bologna, 2007. For specific cases, see, among others: D. Andreozzi, *Nascita di un disordine. Una famiglia signorile e una valle piacentina tra XV e XVI secolo*, Milano, 1993; G. Chittolini, *Città, comunità e feudi negli stati dell'Italia centro-settentrionale (XIV-XVI secolo)*, Milano, 1996; E. Fasano Guarini and F. Bonatti (eds.), *Feudi di Lunigiana tra Impero, Spagna e Stati italiani*, La Spezia, 2008; C. Cremonini and R. Musso (eds.), *I feudi imperiali in Italia tra XV e XVIII secolo*, Bordighera-Albenga, 2010; F. Cengarle, "Lordships, fiefs and small states", in A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State*, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 284-303; G. Maifreda, "La feudalità lombarda in età spagnola: recenti studi di storia economica", in *Studi storici Luigi Simeoni*, n. 53, 2013, pp. 75-86; G. V. Parigino, "Continuità e mutamento. Il feudo nel Granducato mediceo tra espansione territoriale e promozione sociale", in *Ricerche Storiche*, n. 44, 2014, pp. 209-232.

<sup>21</sup> A. Sisto, *I feudi imperiali nel Tortonese (sec. XI-XIX)*, Turin, 1956; A. Zanini, *Strategie politiche ed economia feudale ai confini della Repubblica di Genova (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, "Un buon negotio con qualche contrarietà", Genova, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> A. Zanini, "Feudi, feudatari ed economie nella montagna ligure", in M. Schnettger and C. Taviani (eds.), *Libertà e dominio. Il sistema politico genovese: le relazioni esterne e il controllo del territorio*, Roma, 2011, pp. 305-316.

scale manufacturing activities, especially ironworks, due to the presence of woods, which provided the fuel, and watercourses that served as a source of energy.<sup>23</sup> This confirmed their “rational” approach, a typical capitalist attitude of feudal lords, which was part of their mind set: as Genoese patricians, they were active businessmen, involved in long-distance trade and international finance. Therefore, as a well-established historiography already pointed out, they were not simply rentiers: they were imbued with an entrepreneurial spirit, which contributed to shaping the management of their assets taking also into account issues of economic rationality. These criteria were followed also for their fiefs, which, from an economic point of view, were regarded as an asset among the others that should produce a flow of incomes, in proportion to the capital invested, and thus contribute to improving the family budget.<sup>24</sup>

Similar patterns also emerged from studies concerning other Italian areas. For example, Bertrand Forclaz pointed out that the Borghese, a prominent Roman family, successfully adopted a “careful” approach to managing at best their fiefs in the Latium area.<sup>25</sup> Another case is that of the Caetanis, another Roman aristocratic family.<sup>26</sup>

Concerning the geo-economic features of the *Oltregiogo*, a typical key element to improve feudal income was to capitalize on the natural predisposition of these fiefs to become crossroads between people and states. Their function as “places of transit” was attested by the presence of several tolling stations along the main routes (most of them were simple mule tracks); in many cases, tolls on goods

<sup>23</sup> Zanini, *Strategie politiche*, pp. 141-158.

<sup>24</sup> F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century*, Vol. III, *The Perspective of the World*, Berkley-Los Angeles, 1992, p. 158. On Genoese attitude toward the management of their assets, see: G. Felloni and L. Piccinno, “La cultura economica”, in D. Puncuh (ed.), *Storia della cultura ligure*, Vol. 1, Genova, 2004, pp. 241-253.

<sup>25</sup> B. Forclaz, “A careful management: the Borghese family and their fiefs in early modern Lazio”, in *Journal of Early Modern History*, no. 12, 2008, pp. 169-193.

<sup>26</sup> M.V. Piñeiro, “Terre e acque nella signoria dei Caetani di Sermoneta (1504-1586)”, in C. Fiorani (ed.), *Virtù più che virili. Le lettere familiari di Beatrice Caetani Cesi (1557-1608)*, Roma, 2017, pp. 8-9.

passing through their territories represented a major source of revenue for local landlords.<sup>27</sup>

Over time, some feudal lords proved to be very dynamic: they laid the foundations to further improve trade flows. For this purpose, they opened inns and taverns to host transients and encouraged the development of weekly markets and annual fairs to attract merchants from outside. Although the dispersion and the incompleteness of documentary sources do not allow to outline a comprehensive picture of all the fairs and markets existing in the *Oltregiogo*, most of them, especially within feudal contexts, were not born from below to satisfy the needs of the population but were the outcome of a top-down process: they were established on the initiative of the feudal lords, who also provided rules and controls to ensure their proper functioning. This process led to an institutional change: trade was forced to follow specific rules, and thus a previously informal market, characterized by significant information asymmetries and high transaction costs, shifted towards a more formal one, through the enhancement of institutional protection. This was a precondition to foster an increase in the number of participating merchants and the volume of transactions.<sup>28</sup>

Like in many other cases, in the *Oltregiogo* weekly (or sometimes daily) markets and annual fairs performed different functions. In particular, the firsts were normally visited by local peasants and people from neighbouring villages, who sold and bought their agricultural surplus. The average size of the consignments traded was

---

<sup>27</sup> Sisto, *I feudi imperiali*, pp. 196-201, 211-13; Zanini, *Feudi*, pp. 305-16. V. Tigrino, "Giurisdizione e transiti nei 'feudi di Montagna' dei Doria Pamphilj alla fine dell'Antico Regime", in A. Torre (ed.), *Per vie di terra. Movimenti di uomini e di cose nelle società di antico regime*, Milano, 2007, pp. 151-174.

<sup>28</sup> O. Williamson, "The Economics of Organizations: The Transaction Cost Approach", in *American Journal of Sociology*, 87/3, 1981, pp. 548-577; D. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge, 1991; D. Acemoglu and J.A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, New York, 2012. On the evolution of the concept, see O. Habimana, "From Coase to Williamson: evolution, formalization and empirics of transaction cost Economics", in *Journal of Social Economics*, 3/1, 2015, pp. 36-42.

generally small, and thus they worked mainly as retail markets. On the other hand, annual fairs were often able to attract merchants and goods from a wider area and supplied local people with a wide range of wares: salt, fish, cloths and textiles, seed, cattle, farm tools, etc. not available daily. As a result, most of these fairs worked both as retail and wholesale markets. Another difference concerned the structure of exchanges: while in weekly markets, trade took place mainly within the rural economy, in annual fairs trade could also become a bridge between rural and urban economies, in both directions.<sup>29</sup>

From a long-run perspective, the function of these fairs and markets could vary over time. Initially, most of them attracted a small number of buyers and sellers; however, in many cases, they gradually acquired a wider relevance. Nevertheless, unlike in some other contexts, fairs and markets operating in the *Oltregiogo* were not specialist markets focused on a single commodity (e.g.: cattle, grain, etc.), since they provided the opportunity to trade in a variety of goods, especially foodstuffs.<sup>30</sup>

One of the key elements able to ensure the success of a new fair or market is the granting of privileges, such as toll exemption, or, at

---

<sup>29</sup> See, among the others: M. Ambrosoli, "Fiere e mercati in un'area agricola piemontese fra Sette e Ottocento", in *Storia d'Italia. Annali. 1. Dal feudalesimo al capitalismo*, Turin, 1978, pp. 661-711; A. Bonoldi, "I luoghi dello scambio. Città, fiere e mercati in area alpina", in *Histoire des Alpes/Storia delle Alpi/Geschichte der Alpen*, no. 8, 2003, pp. 207-223; D. Margairaz, "La formation du réseau des foires et des marches: stratégies, pratiques et idéologies", in *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, no. 41, 1986, pp. 1215-1242; I. Mitchell, "The changing role of fairs in the long eighteenth century: evidence from the north midlands", in *The Economic History Review*, no. 60, 2007, pp. 545-573; P. O' Flanagan, "Markets and Fairs in Ireland, 1600-1800: Index of Economic Development and Regional Growth", in *Journal of Historical Geography*, no. 11, 1985, pp. 364-378; A. Radeffe, "Grandes et petites foires du Moyen Age au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. Conjoncture générale et cas Vaudois", in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, no. 75, 1991, pp. 329-348; S. Cavaciocchi (ed.) *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione delle economie europee*, Firenze 2001; W. Ronsijn, "Smallholders, Spinners, Weavers and the 'Scarcity of Markets' in the Flemish Countryside, c. 1780-1850: Motivations behind the Multiplication of Periodic Markets", in *Rural History*, no. 25, 2014, pp. 39-60.

<sup>30</sup> Centro di Studi e Documentazione di Storia economica "Archivio Doria" (hereafter ADG), *Salvago Raggi*, 342 and 353.

least, a reduction of the fiscal burden (for example only goods actually sold during the fair had to pay, while goods in transit enjoyed an exemption or reduction, depending on the case). Special safeguards were normally allowed to merchants visiting the fairs: they should not be arrested (except in case of flagrante delicto) or harassed, or even their merchandise seized for previous debts, as the enforcement of civil court decisions was temporarily suspended. It should be pointed out that the arrival of many foreigners posed specific problems regarding public order. To face this situation, the number of guards on duty was increased, and special bans were issued: weapons were forbidden, as well as dancing (both in public places and in private houses); other restrictions might concern gamblers and charlatans.<sup>31</sup> All these measures aimed at fostering a wider participation, increasing the turnover, and, consequently, the benefits for the feudal lord. From this point of view, there were direct and indirect advantages. The first ones were the rise of revenues (taxes/tolls), while the second ones were mainly the growth of the local economy and the population. All these factors contributed to increase the power of the local lord, the strategic role, and the economic value of the fief itself.

To better understand the inner working of rural markets in the *Oltregiogo* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we will focus on two case studies: the Scrivia Valley and the Curone Valley. Both are significant examples of how it was the intervention of the feudal lord that determined the success of the rural market, which became a reference point for the entire surrounding area. However, the two cases have some specific features that make them of particular interest. More specifically, in the case of Valle Scrivia, the most important market was that of Casella, that managed to impose itself on the other existing markets of the neighbouring fiefdoms. As far as the Curone Valley was concerned, the village of San Sebastiano was specifically chosen as a marketplace in a context in which there

---

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Archivio di Stato di Genova (hereafter ASG), *Camera del Governo e Finanze*, 2762.

were no other centres with the same functions and therefore enjoyed a sort of “monopoly”.

### The Scrivia Valley and the market of Casella

The Scrivia Valley is a vast area of the *Oltregiogo* that follows the path of the Scrivia River, a tributary of the Po, characterized by the presence of numerous imperial fiefdoms. During the seventeenth century, many feudal lords strove to improve trade flows and related incomes. Tolls on goods in transit were set up, new fairs and markets were approved, inns and taverns were built to accommodate “foreign” merchants. Each feudal lord could regulate economic activities within his fiefdom; however, his choices could also have an impact on adjoining territories, diverting trade flows and related tax revenues. As a result, neighbouring lords were often encouraged to adopt similar behaviour, thus triggering a sort of “back and forth” process, thus contributing over time to increase the number of fairs and markets in the area. For example, in 1606, Stefano Spinola, lord of Ronco, asked the emperor for permission to introduce a toll on goods passing through the fief, and provided facilities to foster the development of a local market of foodstuffs. Having ascertained that the new toll did not infringe the right of the surrounding feudal lords, in 1607, the emperor approved Spinola’s request.<sup>32</sup>

In the following years, the neighbouring fiefdoms followed a similar path: in Borgo Fornari a new fair was introduced, on many people from nearby villages, whose liveliness contributed to revitalizing local trade and that, alone, could secure even five percent of the entire annual toll revenue.<sup>33</sup>

However, the most striking example is that of Casella, in the jurisdiction of Savignone, an imperial fief given to a branch of the Fieschi family. In 1691, Count Urbano Fieschi issued a license for an

<sup>32</sup> Sisto, *I feudi imperiali*, p. 117.

<sup>33</sup> See ASG, *Camera del Governo e Finanze*, 2760 and 2762.

annual fair to be held in Casella on Saint Eusebius's feast (August 1st). The fair lasted three days, during which incoming and outgoing goods should be exempted from every toll, duty, and tax. Moreover, Count Urbano granted the right to hold a market every Thursday, in perpetuity, enjoying the same tax breaks as the fair. Both these fiscal facilities had been granted for the first five years, to promote the development of the new fair and market. From this respect, the situation was not so different from that of the neighbouring fiefdoms, which teemed with fairs and weekly markets. However, what characterized the case of Casella was the decision of Urbano Fieschi to go well beyond the mere creation of a new institutional framework: in the following years, he ordered the construction of the *Casa del Mercato* (literally the House of the Market). Strategically located along the road through the village, it aimed at becoming the beating heart of foodstuffs trade, especially cereals. The building featured wide spaces for trading goods, several warehouses, and a tavern with some beds to host foreign merchants. In a short time, the *Casa del Mercato* and the services provided to buyers and sellers contributed to boost further the local trade, hence consolidating the role of Casella as a trading place.<sup>34</sup>

In 1717, new rules for the "smooth running of trade" were issued. The aim was to prevent fraud concerning the weight and measuring of goods traded, as well as the exchange between different currencies. Moreover, a tax was levied, set in five *soldi* (a quarter of a Genoese lira) for each bag of goods, regardless of their kind and quality. Therefore, the *Casa del Mercato* was the only place where foodstuffs could be traded. The decision to introduce a tax on goods testified the success achieved by the market, as the landlord thought that the initial tax break aimed at encouraging commercial transactions was no longer necessary. During the following years, further rules were enacted to ensure a smoother better functioning of the market. The ban to trade foodstuffs outside the *Casa del Mercato* was

---

<sup>34</sup> M. Firpo, *Il mercato di Casella. Un investimento fliscano lungo la "Via del Pedaggio"*, Genova, 2010, pp. 15-28.

reiterated; moreover, it was ordered that local people could not buy goods before every foreign merchant had purchased all the victuals he needed. This measure is further proof of the ability of Casella's market to attract traders from outside.<sup>35</sup>

For the second half of the eighteenth century, we have some information concerning the quantities of goods traded. Wheat represented the most important commodity, followed by rice and dried chestnuts, which were a basic element of peasants' diet. Figures for the period 1765-1782 indicate that the quantity of grain sold in Casella varied considerably from one year to another, and ranged from a minimum of 1,770 *mine* (one mina was about 91 kilograms) to a maximum of 11,200 *mine*, that is a substantial quantity. Suffice it to say that (according to coeval estimations) that amount was enough to feed about 5,000 inhabitants, more than three times the local population.<sup>36</sup>

The importance of Casella compared to the already mentioned neighbouring fiefdoms of Ronco, Borgo Fornari and Busalla is even more evident if we consider the number of tolls and trade taxes collected in the different territories, also in relation to their population (Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
Annual average of feudal incomes from tolls and taxes on trade  
in four villages of the Scrivia Valley (1768-73)

Fief	Tolls and taxes on trade (In Genoese liras)	Population
Ronco	484	1,250
Borgo Fornari	193	850
Busalla	777	1,500
Savignone (Casella)	2,255	1,500

Source: ASC, *Camera del Governo e Finanze*, 2760 and 2762; ADG, *Salvago Raggi*, 241; APF, folder 54.

<sup>35</sup> Firpo, *Il mercato di Casella*, pp. 29-54.

<sup>36</sup> See: Archivio Privato Fieschi, (hereafter APF) Genoa, Folder 54.

Sources did not report information concerning the origin and destination of the grain, not even the number of foreign merchants involved; however, it is evident that Casella acquired a certain importance at least at a regional level, and its *Casa del Mercato* was both a retail and wholesale market. This situation lasted almost unchanged until 1797 when the fall of the system of imperial fiefdoms put an end to Fieschis' control of this area.<sup>37</sup> Although the geographic location of the fief was a precondition, the success of its market would not be possible without the direct intervention of the feudal lords. In particular, Count Urbano Fieschi and his descendants, adopted a far-sighted strategy and made use of their feudal power to create physical infrastructures and a legal framework able to reduce transaction costs and thus encourage foreign merchants to trade in the *Casa del Mercato*. Thanks to these institutional interventions, Casella shifted towards a rural market for foodstuffs of some importance, and the Fieschi family could raise feudal income. This, in turn, brought benefits to their subjects and to the economy of this small Apennine fiefdom. It can therefore be concluded that Fieschis' intervention in Casella goes beyond a mere intervention aimed at increasing feudal revenue, as it presents the distinctive feature of a veritable economic policy, albeit on a micro scale.

### **The Curone Valley and the market of San Sebastiano**

A portion of the Curone Valley, east of the Scrivia Valley, was a fief of the Fieschi family from the second half of the fifteenth century until 1547. In that year, after the Fieschis' conspiracy in Genoa, Emperor Charles V deprived the Fieschi of these fiefs and assigned them to Andrea Doria.<sup>38</sup> Thanks to this prince and his descendants, the village of San Sebastiano Curone became a place of transit and trade. The inhabitants of this area "are all traffickers, so as not to

---

<sup>37</sup> A. Zanini, *Strategie politiche*, pp. 33-38; Sisto, *I feudi imperiali*, p. 175.

<sup>38</sup> G. Airaldi, *La congiura dei Fieschi*, Roma, 2017.

have many possessions to exploit“, as Tomeno Berruti, a historian from Tortona, wrote in the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>39</sup> San Sebastiano Curone was part of the imperial fief of Carrega Ligure, but actually, the exact jurisdiction of these places was very complicated.

The fiefdoms and the territorial area were heterogeneous, due to their conformation and economic, social, and political aspects. There was a substantial difference between some of these fiefdoms, which were of undoubted imperial quality – where the House of Doria exercised full dominion, subject only to imperial superiority – and another group of lands, which were instead “freed” [*affrancati*]; these enjoyed a strong degree of autonomy but remained formally linked to the Duchy of Milan.<sup>40</sup>

Until the end of the Ancient Regime, thanks to Andrea Doria and his descendants, the village of San Sebastiano Curone was a lively commercial centre situated on a mule-track that from Genoa goes inland towards the Po Valley. From San Sebastiano, moreover, three possible routes branched towards the plain, the first crossed the Curone Valley and went to Tortona, the second went through the Staffora Valley towards Voghera and Pavia, and the third went through the fiefs of the Malaspina family towards Piacenza.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the area had an important strategic role for the Spanish

<sup>39</sup> T. Berruti, *Cronaca di Tortona*, Sergio Pagano (ed.), Tortona, 2001, pp. 237-238.

<sup>40</sup> V. Tigrino, “Giurisdizione e transiti nel Settecento. I Feudi imperiali tra il Genovesato e la Pianura Padana”, in M. Cavallera (ed.), *Lungo le antiche strade. Vie d’acqua e di terra tra stati, giurisdizioni e confini nella cartografia dell’età moderna*, Busto Arsizio, 2007, pp. 45-94. Concerning jurisdictional aspects see: J.W. Black, “Natura feudi haec est: Lawyers and Feudatories in the Duchy of Milan”, in *The English Historical Review*, no. 109, 1994, pp. 1150-1173; O. Raggio, *Feuds and State Formation*; L. Maffi and M. Rochini, “Poor relief systems in rural Italy: the territory of the diocese of Tortona in the eighteenth century”, in *Continuity and Change*, no. 31, 2016, pp. 211-239; C. Cremonini, *Impero e feudi italiani tra Cinque e Settecento*, Roma, 2004; Cremonini and Musso (eds.), *I feudi imperiali in Italia*; P. Castiglioni, “La condizione giuridico economica degli abitanti del feudo di Ottone (sec. XVII-XVIII)”, in *Archivum Bobiense. Rivista degli archivi storici bobiensis*, no. 22, 2000, pp. 313-336.

<sup>41</sup> Archivio di Stato di Torino (hereafter AST), *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 1, Fascicolo 57*.

empire, which was transferring men and funds to support the war in Northern Europe. In the European scenario, the corridors between Genoa and Lombardy were of great military importance, as demonstrated by Davide Maffi and Mario Rizzo.<sup>42</sup>

The Doria family immediately understood that the only way to profitably use the fief was to transform it into a sort of commercial corridor, which could connect rich agricultural areas of Milan and Piacenza with Genoa, creating an alternative to the road along the Scrivia Valley. To facilitate this prospect of commercial development, the Doria “freed” the fiefdom by making it as independent as possible from the central power. Its position on the valley floor, along the mule-track, made San Sebastiano the ideal place for a stopover for this traffic, as it was also located near the border of the Northern fiefdoms to the north. The village changed over a few decades, with the construction of warehouses, deposits, taverns, and dormitories. In 1567, a document listed the goods that passed through and were exchanged at the San Sebastiano market: grain, oats, flax, oil, soap, salt, and wine; in those years about 50 mules a day arrived in San Sebastiano from the Pavia, Piacenza and Genoa areas, for which Prince Doria levied a duty [duty considered undue by Milan]. Thanks to this particular legal condition of the area, muleteers started to move about undisturbed with their caravans. In 1561, Commissioner Cosmo Nespola, who oversaw the payment of the Dernice Gabella tax on the mule track that went up to the pass for the Val Borbera, received the precise order from Milan to grant the “usual” free transit to men and goods coming from Gremiasco,

---

<sup>42</sup> D. Maffi, *La cittadella in armi. Esercito, società e finanza nella Lombardia di Carlo II, 1660-1700*, Milano, 2010; M. Rizzo, “Gli Austrias e l’Italia centrosettentrionale nella prima età moderna. Una rapsodia geopolitica, in *Feudi di Lunigiana tra Impero, Spagna e Stati Italiani (XV-XVIII secolo)*”, in *Memorie della Accademia Lunigianese di Scienze “Giovanni Capellini”*, 78, 2008, pp. 67-113; A. Pacini, M. Rizzo, “Si no quiere perder el estado de Milán y quanto tiene en Italia. Filippo II, Genova, Milano e la strategia asburgica nel fatidico 1575”, in E. García Hernán, D. Maffi (eds.), *Estudios sobre guerra y sociedad en la Monarquía Hispánica. Guerra marítima, estrategia, organización y cultura militar (1500-1700)*, Valencia, 2017, pp. 853-878.

Favrega, Bagnaria, San Sebastiano, Garbagna, Grondona, and Vargo to attend the “usual” market. The order also specified that grain, “especially from San Sebastiano”, bound to Genoa, should be moved to Dernice and other places free of tax.<sup>43</sup> The only warning for Nespola was to make sure that the grain in transit to San Sebastiano did not come from the State of Milan but only from the Piacenza area.<sup>44</sup> The role of the Doria family in the development and protection of this commercial traffic is evident; this position gave rise to constant intercourse with the neighbouring states, which began in the sixteenth century and continued in the seventeenth century. Thanks to the Doria, the traffic of San Sebastiano continued to be protected, and its market continued to operate.<sup>45</sup>

In 1573, the commissioner of Gremiasco, Luigino Rocca, was charged with the release of 5 donkeys, 2 mules, and a horse, all loaded with wheat, seized by the Spanish captain Peralta – “on the road from the mountains of Piacenza to Santo Sebastiano, a free place in the grain trade”. In 1574, the “Captain of Casteggio” was ordered not to – “disturb those who carry grain to the market of San Sebastiano.”<sup>46</sup> However, from 1585, the Republic of Genoa made the Bocchetta road passable through Pontedecimo, Voltaggio, Carrosio, Gavi and Novi, favouring an itinerary further west than the old road of the Scrivia Valley, and passing through the territory of the Republic. This policy favoured the development of Novi, penalizing Seravalle, but it also penalized routes to the east of the Scrivia Valley, such as that of San Sebastiano.

---

<sup>43</sup> AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 1, Fascicolo 57.*

<sup>44</sup> AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto. Scritture riguardanti il contado e la provincia di Tortona, Tortonese, Mazzo 20, Cantalupo e Borgo, Fascicolo 17*; AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 1, Fascicolo 48.* See also: Archivio di Stato di Milano (hereafter ASM), *Atti di Governo, Feudi Imperiali*, 236. “Documenti relativi al transito dei grani a favore di Luciano Spinola” (May 10, 1561).

<sup>45</sup> ASM, *Atti di Governo, Feudi Imperiali*, 236. “Documenti relativi al transito dei grani a favore di Luciano Spinola” (March 16, 1574).

<sup>46</sup> I. Cammarata, *“Siamo uomini liberi”: documenti per la storia di San Sebastiano Curone*, Varzi, 2015, p. 35.

During the seventeenth century, the importance of the grain roads from the Po Valley to Liguria continued. Information is often contained in the controversies caused by the uncertainty of the jurisdictions and the definition of the competences for those territories. On August 22nd, 1655, the feudal lord of Dernice, Luciano Spinola, lodged a complaint to the court of Milan, claiming that “several wayward soldiers from the Tortona Presidium commit frequent robberies, taking advantage of the convenience of the place to escape after committing the crime.”<sup>47</sup> Lately, together with many local peasants, they took six mules from the nearby market of San Sebastiano, where the grains did not arrive from the State of Milan but from Piacenza and paid a large duty in Serravalle. The tribunal replied that several documents testified that the fief of Gremiasco, San Sebastiano, Bagnara, and Fabbrica was owned by Prince Doria. The prince and his subjects were allowed to take the grains, especially from San Sebastiano where there is a public market to Genoa, via Dernice. They are imagined to be foreign grains coming from the Piacenza area and not of local production.

These places in the Apennines, therefore, were transit routes that the feudal lords could exploit for their interests and whose rights they tried to safeguard in every way. Grains coming from the Piacenza area and in transit to Genoa were not subject to duty, as it was paid in Serravalle. From Zavattarello to Serravalle there was, therefore, a sort of tax-free corridor, along which the muleteers had to follow codified routes. As far as the grains produced in the Duchy of Milan were concerned (to discourage export), they had to be accompanied by special authorization, the *tratta*, which, however, exempted them from following a precise route.

However, the situation was complex due to jurisdictional problems. The Doria family considered San Sebastiano as a part of their imperial fief of Carrega, while the State of Milan considered it as a chamber fief [*feudo camerale*]. A series of disputes occurred in the sec-

---

<sup>47</sup> ASM, *Atti di Governo, Feudi Imperiali*, 236. “Documenti relativi al transito dei grani a favore di Luciano Spinola” (August 22, 1655).

ond half of the seventeenth century and the Doria also paid a large sum of money to free it. In particular, the House of Doria was interested in indicating the routes to be used by the inhabitants of those territories to transport cereals, wine, and other goods to the Genoese area.<sup>48</sup> It is therefore clear that the Doria considered San Sebastiano as part of their fief of Gremiasco, with particular privileges, including the possibility of holding a market and not only of exchanging grains harvested in their territory, but also grains from other states heading for the Genoese area.<sup>49</sup>

In 1680, Count Antonio Della Porta was sent there for an inspection on behalf of the State of Milan. He listened to witnesses and drew up a report with important information about the market.<sup>50</sup> At that time, San Sebastiano had about 130 families and 1,200 inhabitants. Its “daily market” was born after the development of the village, in the early 1500s, at the time of the Fieschi Counts. However, in the past, the volume of goods was even more important until Prince Doria forbade trade with the State of Milan, determining a contraction in trade.<sup>51</sup> The goods were unloaded from the backs of the mules into the brokers’ courtyards, where negotiations took place. The brokers received 6 *quattrini* for each sack exchanged by both the seller and the buyer. The various kinds of goods – wheat, legumes, broad beans, maize, linseed, canvas, etc. – came from Genoa and Piacenza.<sup>52</sup>

The success of this market also comes from being free from duty and also derives from the particular jurisdictional condition. Count Della Porta himself summarized this situation: “In the land of San

---

<sup>48</sup> Archivio Doria Pamphilj, Roma, sc. 41, b. See also: V. Tigrino, “Giurisdizione e transiti nel Settecento”, p. 91.

<sup>49</sup> The fiefdom of Gremiasco also included the territories of Monteacuto, Bagnaria, Fabrica and San Sebastiano. See Tigrino, “Giurisdizione e transiti nel Settecento”, p. 71. Tigrino analyzes these characteristics with specific documentary reference: Archivio Doria Pamphilj, Roma, sc. 67, b. 24 (March 29, 1695).

<sup>50</sup> AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 2, Fascicolo 8.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Sebastiano, all edible things are sold and bought freely. There is no prohibitive condition or payment of duty; moreover, the same freedom is also in the traffic of goods.”<sup>53</sup>

The market in San Sebastiano was very active even at the end of the seventeenth century and there were still frequent incidents relating to jurisdictions and prerogatives. In 1698, the above-mentioned Marquis Luciano Spinola presented another appeal to the court concerning the seizure of muleteers’ goods. Controversies generated as the market of San Sebastiano was free of duty, and the flow of goods coming from the Piacenza area mixed with local grains, creating a blend and laying the foundations for abuse of power on behalf of the troops in charge of control. The supplication of Spinola succeeded and in 1698 a stamped order from Milan reiterated that cereals transiting through Dernice, coming from San Sebastiano and heading to Genoa were free of duty, and confirmed the prohibition to bring cereals from the State of Milan<sup>54</sup> to the market of San Sebastiano.

In 1733, however, there was an epochal change: Carlo Emanuele III of Savoy invaded and conquered the Tortona area, blocking the direct road link between Milan and Genoa. The traditional routes were still passable upon payment of duties, but in case of war, they could be blocked. Therefore, the Austrians looked for alternative ways to go towards Genoa from the Po Valley. A 1736 report contains a reference to the village of San Sebastiano: “There is a market every day for all sorts of grains, rice, and crops, which are then carried to Genoa on mule back. There are plenty of warehouses, with convenient storage of salt and grains, so you could stop there for all the goods proceeding from Genoa to the State of Milan.”<sup>55</sup> Once again, the problem of borders in the Curone Valley emerged as well as the

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. In addition to Antonio della Porta’s report there is further information in AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 2, Fascicolo 11*.

<sup>54</sup> Cammarata, “*Siamo uomini liberi*”, p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 2, Fascicolo 17*.

jurisdictional issue of whether San Sebastiano was an imperial fief or if part of the Valley could be annexed to the Kingdom of Sardinia. In particular, there was the dilemma of transit routes, because if the Piedmontese did not take the Dernice Pass, this would remain a convenient communication corridor between the Genoa area and Piacenza, which was also an easy route for smugglers.<sup>56</sup>

In 1737, following an order of the Austrians, Count Giuseppe Corredor wrote a memorandum with a project for a road reaching Genoa through the Apennines, without crossing the lands annexed to the Kingdom of Sardinia, and San Sebastiano was a key place.<sup>57</sup> However, despite the complexity of the jurisdictions of these lands and the fact that they belonged to the House of Doria, in 1738 the Piedmontese annexed the entire Val Curone, precisely to avoid direct transit routes between Milan and Genoa that would exclude territories in the Kingdom of Sardinia. Only the longest (easternmost) transit route through the Tidone and Trebbia valleys to Genoa, passing through Bobbio, Ponte Organasco, Ottone, Rovegno, and Montebruno, remained outside the control of the Savoy.

However, even after the Piedmontese annexation, the market of San Sebastiano retained its importance, as it can be seen from the description of the Piedmontese Intendant of Tortona, Massa, written in 1751-52. In a context of poor valleys, which were subject to the seasonal migration of the labour force towards the Po Valley or the Genoa area, in San Sebastiano “everyone dedicates themselves to the market of grain, tobacco, tallow candles, and salt, holding a daily market of these wares.”<sup>58</sup> To find a new economic opportunity for these territories, now subject to Savoy rule, the community of San Sebastiano sought an agreement with the Kingdom of Sardinia. In 1763 the Community of San Sebastiano addressed a petition to the

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Tigrino, “Giurisdizione e transiti nel Settecento”, pp. 45-94. On the Milanese project by count Giuseppe Corredor see A. Arzano, “Una strada Milano-Genova nel 1737”, in *Iulia Dertona*, no. 8, 1910, pp. 3-31.

<sup>58</sup> AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 3, Fascicolo 14.*

Secretariat of State of Turin, which stated that “since the opening of the Bocchetta road, transits have almost disappeared because the Genoese have chosen to channel all the trade flows towards Novi.”<sup>59</sup> In the petition, there requested that “the rice and grain from Lomellina, Vigevanasco, Novarese, and Oltrepò Pavese” should pass through San Sebastiano, and therefore the sovereign would “force muleteers and drivers to take them not to Novi, but rather to the market of San Sebastiano”, from where they could reach Genoa passing through Serravalle. The project would also be profitable for the sovereign because the muleteers, after leaving San Sebastiano, would have to pay a duty to the Customs House of Dernice and Cabella. The payment would amount to 4.5 soldi per pack of wheat, 9 soldi per pack of legumes, and 20 *soldi* per pack of rice. Moreover, drivers would not suffer any negative consequences because the road from the Po River to Novi is as long as the one from the Po to San Sebastiano, and the one from San Sebastiano to Genoa is the same as from Novi to Genoa. However, the proposal of the community of San Sebastiano was rejected.<sup>60</sup>

In 1766, the head of the Piedmontese administration of Voghera wrote in Turin that representatives of the community of San Sebastiano came to his office several times, demanding that permission for this transit be continued. Without this transit “their market and the trade of the inhabitants were entirely destroyed.”<sup>61</sup> The inhabitants of San Sebastiano asked at least to be allowed to obtain the necessary grain for local sustenance from Piacenza since the area was poor and mountainous.

The decline of this market, therefore, began before the end of the ancient regime and imperial fiefs, after the annexation of the areas of Tortona and Voghera to the Kingdom of Sardinia, when the *Via*

---

<sup>59</sup> AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 3, Fascicolo 23.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> On the situation in those years see: AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 3, Fascicolo 26*; AST, *Sezione Corte, Paesi di nuovo acquisto, Feudi affrancati del Principe Doria, Mazzo 3, Fascicolo 30.*

*dello Scrivia* was definitively privileged. This descending parable reached its climax in the last decades of the eighteenth century when the decline of the market made it difficult to find grain, even for local needs. In 1783, for example, due to famine and the decline of the daily market, the chapter of the religious brotherhoods of the Oratory of the Holy Trinity decided to provide for the purchase of grains for public use.

The flourishing period of the San Sebastiano market and its unstoppable decline at the end of the modern age are also confirmed in the 1820 report by the mayor of San Sebastiano who recalled that, in the past, transit trade was vital for the population. At that time, however, there was almost no grain traffic, and the community had become poor and miserable. In concluding his desperate cry for help, the mayor expressed once again the hope that transit coming from the Piacenza area could be re-established."<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusions

Our article focuses on the complexity of the distinctive aspects of a transit area over the Ligurian Apennines. The area was characterized by complementary economies and political fragmentation that persisted well into modern times due to the presence of imperial fiefs and the lack of strong state dynamics. All along the roads, markets were born, favouring, from an economic and social point of view, the rule of the lords on individual territories. Economic life is one of the factors that qualify these microstates and it is strongly influenced by the role of the feudal lord who was not only interested in increasing his rents, but also in adopting measures that had the features of veritable policies of economic development of the area where he exercised his sovereignty.

For a long time, historiography has polarized following models that were ascribed either to a feudal specification or to a capitalist

---

<sup>62</sup> The document is transcribed in Cammarata, *"Siamo uomini liberi"*, p. 156.

specification. Witold Kula, for example, identified the specific characteristics of the Polish feudal system of the modern age – its economic bodies, laws, brakes, and limits – and also established a whole series of differences between the feudal and capitalist economic systems.<sup>63</sup> In this way, in an evident dichotomous structure, he excluded that feudalism, especially in the early modern age, could be considered as a political, economic, and social system characterized by any positive features. Other scholars, instead, avoided leading to a unique model of representing the feudal economy. On the contrary, they have enhanced the peculiarities of the different geographical areas.<sup>64</sup> We have followed this approach, putting the elements of the economic life of these microstates in a new perspective.

A second aspect we have analysed is the role of the feudal lords of some territories in Northern Italy as actors able to regulate the economic life of microstates. They had a political and economic vision characterized by elements oriented towards development and not anchored to the mere exploitation or revenue.

These microstates were governed by families from the Genoese patriciate with experience in international trade, credit, finance, and diplomacy. They thus had the skills to become feudal lords able to foster the economy of the territories they ruled.<sup>65</sup>

Another innovative factor of our study is that we place microstates at the centre of the analysis, enhancing their peculiar characteristics, demonstrating their economic role as transit territories, favourable to the creation of local markets having specific characteristics depending on the context.

---

<sup>63</sup> W. Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy, 1500-1800*, London, 1976.

<sup>64</sup> See for example: M. Aymard, "L'Europe moderne: féodalité ou féodalités?", in *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, no. 36, 1981, pp. 426-435; Id., "Autoconsommation et marchés: Chayanov, Labrousse ou Le Roy Ladurie?", in *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, no. 38, 1983, pp. 1392-1410.

<sup>65</sup> See: A. Zanini, *Impresa e finanza a Genova. I Crosa (secoli XVII-XVIII)*, Genova, 2017; G. Felloni, *Gli investimenti finanziari genovesi in Europa tra il Seicento e la Restaurazione*, Milano, 1971.

Thanks also to the interventions of the feudal lords, the rural markets that developed in these areas, became essential not only for the valleys but also for the neighbouring territories of the Oltregiogo region. Moreover, these markets were part of wider commercial circuits, along transit routes that connected the most important states of Northern Italy: the Duchy of Milan, the Duchy of Savoy, the Republic of Genoa, and the Duchy of Parma.

Italian historiography has focused on analysing the sources of feudal landowners' revenues – exploitation of land, real estate income, and other activities – showing the privileges and institutional characteristics of feudality in the early modern age.<sup>66</sup> However, historiography does not emphasize the economic strategies that concern territories, capable of attracting capital from other areas and generating development.

The intention of the feudal lord was not to create the conditions to sell his rent in kind at the best price but to develop markets that could generate other income. The success of this initiative came from his ability to attract not only local buyers and sellers but also to catalyse people from other areas. In this way, the lord could increase feudal revenue with the consequent positive externality of improving the economic conditions of his subject.

The spatial factor is very important. At a distance of a few kilometres, but in different valleys separated by often unpassable mountain barriers, different situations were created. As an example in the villages of the Scrivia Valley, characterized by the presence of important transit routes, fairs and markets were often competing with each other. Also in this situation, the feudal lord's institutional intervention was constantly present. In the Val Curone, on the other hand, the feudal lord identified the place of San Sebastiano, located at the bottom of the valley, as the best place for the market, also granting his inhabitants ample freedom to carry out commercial activities.

These microstates were “under special surveillance” by the

---

<sup>66</sup> G. Muto, “Territori, privilegi, feudi”, in *Studi storici*, no. 61, 2020, pp. 449-460.

neighbouring political power: the Republic of Genoa, the Duchy of Milan, and the Duchy of Savoy. This latter, on many occasions, tried to infiltrate feudal jurisdictions, encamping rights, especially in relation to trade control and identifying smuggling as an element to be pursued. This interest of the regional states, in contrast, shows the relevance of these microstates not only in the geopolitics of Northern Italy in the early modern history but also in its more strictly economic dimension.

## Bibliography

- ACEMOGLU D., ROBINSON J.A. (2012), *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, New York.
- AGO R. (1998), *La feudalità in età moderna*, Rome-Bari.
- AIRALDI G. (2017), *La congiura dei Fieschi*, Rome.
- AMBROSOLI M. (1978), "Fiere e mercati in un'area agricola piemontese fra Sette e Ottocento", in *Storia d'Italia. Annali. 1. Dal feudalesimo al capitalismo*, Turin, pp. 661-711.
- ANDREOZZI D. (1993), *Nascita di un disordine. Una famiglia signorile e una valle piacentina tra XV e XVI secolo*, Milano.
- ARZANO A. (1910), "Una strada Milano-Genova nel 1737", in *Iulia Dertona*, 8, pp. 3-31.
- AYMARD M. (1981), "L'Europe moderne: féodalité ou féodalités?", in *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 36, pp. 426-435.
- (1983), "Autoconsommation et marchés: Chayanov, Labrousse ou Le Roy Ladurie?", in *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 38, pp. 1392-1410.
- BAIROCH P. ET AL. (1991), *Cities and Economic Development*, Chicago.
- BATEMAN V.N. (2011), "The evolution of markets in early modern Europe, 1350-1800: a study of wheat prices", in *Economic History Review*, 64, pp. 447-471.
- (2012), *Markets and Growth in Early Modern Europe*, London.
- BATTISTONI M. (2016), "Feudi pontifici, fiscalità e transiti commerciali nel Piemonte del Settecento", in *Cheiron*, 2, pp. 64-88.

- BERRUTI T. (2001), *Cronaca di Tortona*, ed. Sergio Pagano, Tortona.
- BLACK J.W. (1994), "Natura feudi haec est: Lawyers and Feudatories in the Duchy of Milan", in *The English Historical Review*, 109, pp. 1150-1173.
- BONOLDI A. (2003), "I luoghi dello scambio. Città, fiere e mercati in area alpina", in *Histoire des Alpes/Storia delle Alpi/Geschichte der Alpen*, 8, pp. 207-223.
- BRAUDEL F. (1992), *Civilization and Capitalism, 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Century*, Vol. III, *The Perspective of the World*, Berkley-Los Angeles.
- BRENNER R. (1976), "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", in *Past & Present*, 70, pp. 30-75.
- (1982), "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", in *Past & Present*, 97, pp. 16-113.
- CALONACI S. (2018), *Lo spirito del dominio. Giustizia feudale e giurisdizionale nell'Italia moderna (secoli XVI-XVIII)*, Roma.
- CAMMARATA I. (2015), *"Siamo uomini liberi": documenti per la storia di San Sebastiano Curone*, Varzi.
- CASTIGLIONI P. (2000), "La condizione giuridico economica degli abitanti del feudo di Ottone (sec. XVII-XVIII)", in *Archivum Bobiense. Rivista degli archivi storici bobienesi*, 22, pp. 313-336.
- CAVACIOCCHI S. (ed.) (2001), *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione delle economie europee*, Florence.
- CENGARLE F. (2012), "Lordships, fiefs and small states", in A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State*, Cambridge, pp. 284-303.
- CERMEÑO A.L., ENFLO K. (2019), "Can kings create towns that thrive? The long-term implications of new town foundations", in *Journal of Urban Economics*, 112, pp. 50-69.
- CHITTOLINI G. (1996), *Città, comunità e feudi negli stati dell'Italia centro-settentrionale (XIV-XVI secolo)*, Milan.
- COLLAVINI S. (2011), "I signori rurali in Italia centrale (secoli XII- metà XIV): profilo sociale e forme di interazione", in *Mélanges de l'école Française de Rome - Moyen Âge*, 123/2 pp. 301-318.
- CORRITORE R.P., "Il processo di 'ruralizzazione' in Italia nei secoli

- XVII-XVIII. Verso una regionalizzazione”, in *Rivista di Storia economica*, 10, pp. 353-386.
- COSTANTINI F. (2019), “Commercio e contrabbando di cereali in area lombarda tra Seicento e Settecento”, in S.A. Conca Messina and B.A. Raviola (eds.), *Le vie del cibo. Italia settentrionale (secc. XVI-XX)*, Rome, pp. 175-189.
- CREMONINI C. (2004), *Impero e feudi italiani tra Cinque e Settecento*, Rome.
- (2016), “Poteri mediatizzati: feudi pontifici e feudi imperiali. Alcune ipotesi di confronto”, in *Cheiron*, 2, pp. 282-289.
- CREMONINI C., MUSSO R. (eds.) (2010), *I feudi imperiali in Italia tra XI e XVIII secolo*, Bordighera-Albenga.
- CROOT P., PARKER D. (1978), “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development”, in *Past & Present*, 78, pp. 37-47.
- DE VRIES J. (2006), *European Urbanization, 1500-1800*, London.
- DRIBE M., OLSSON M., SVENSSON P. (2012), “Was the manorial system an efficient insurance institution? Economic stress and demographic response in Sweden, 1749-1859”, in *European Review of Economic History*, 16, pp. 292-310.
- FASOLI G. (1973), “Feudo e castello”, in *Storia d’Italia*, vol. 1, *I documenti*, Turin, pp. 261-308.
- FELLONI G. (1971), *Gli investimenti finanziari genovesi in Europa tra il Seicento e la Restaurazione*, Milan.
- FELLONI G., PICCINNO L. (2004), “La cultura economica”, in D. Puncuh (ed.), *Storia della cultura ligure*, Vol. 1, Genova, pp. 229-310.
- FIRPO M. (2010), *Il mercato di Casella. Un investimento fliscano lungo la “Via del Pedaggio”*, Genova.
- FORCLAZ B. (2008), “A careful management: the Borghese family and their fiefs in early modern Lazio”, in *Journal of Early Modern History*, 12, pp. 169-193.
- FRENCH H., HOYLE R. (1999), “The land market of a Pennine manor: Slaidburn, 1650-1780”, in *Continuity and Change*, 14, pp. 349-383.
- (2003), “English Individualism refuted and reasserted: the land market of Earls Colne (Essex), 1550-1750”, in *The Economic History Review*, 56, pp. 595-622.

- (2013), *The character of English rural society*, Manchester.
- GIBSON ALEX J.S., SMOUT T.C. (1995), “Regional Prices and Market Regions: The Evolution of the Early Modern Scottish Grain Market”, in *The Economic History Review*, 48, pp. 258-282.
- HABIMANA O. (2015), “From Coase to Williamson: evolution, formalization and empirics of transaction cost Economics”, in *Journal of Social Economics*, 3/1, pp. 36-42.
- HENNINGSEN P. (2006), *I sansernas vold. Bondekultur og kultursammanstød I enevældens Danmark*, Copenhagen, vol. 1.
- HILTON R. (1976), “Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism”, in *History Workshop*, 1, pp. 9-25.
- HOLTON R.J. (1981), “Marxist Theories of Social Change and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism”, in *Theory and Society*, 10, pp. 833-867.
- HOYLE R. (ed.) (2011), *Custom, improvement and landscape in early modern Britain*, Farnham.
- KULA W. (1976), *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy, 1500-1800*, London.
- MAFFI D. (2010), *La cittadella in armi. Esercito, società e finanza nella Lombardia di Carlo II, 1660-1700*, Milano.
- MAFFI L., ROCHINI M. (2016), “Poor relief systems in rural Italy: the territory of the diocese of Tortona in the eighteenth century”, in *Continuity and Change*, 31, pp. 211-239.
- MAIFREDA G. (2013), “La feudalità lombarda in età spagnola: recenti studi di storia economica”, in *Studi storici Luigi Simeoni*, 53, pp. 75-86.
- MARGAIRAZ D. (1986), “La formation du réseau des foires et des marches: stratégies, pratiques et idéologies”, in *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 41, pp. 1215-1242.
- MITCHELL I. (2007), “The changing role of fairs in the long eighteenth century: evidence from the north midlands”, in *The Economic History Review*, 60, pp. 545-573.
- MONTEVERDE F. (2006), *L'Oltregiogo: una terra strategica per l'Italia*, Genova.
- MUSI A. (2007), *Il feudalesimo nell'Europa moderna*, Bologna.

- MUTO G. (2020), "Territori, privilegi, feudi", in *Studi storici*, 61, pp. 449-460.
- NORTH D. (1991), *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge.
- O' FLANAGAN P. (1985), "Markets and Fairs in Ireland, 1600-1800: Index of Economic Development and Regional Growth", in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 11, pp. 364-378.
- O' ROURKE K.H., WILLIAMSON J.G. (2002), "When did globalisation begin?", in *European Review of Economic History*, 6, pp. 23-50.
- (2004), "Once more: when did globalisation begin?", in *European Review of Economic History*, 8, pp. 109-117.
- PACINI A., RIZZO M. (2017), "Si no quiere perder el estado de Milán y quanto tiene en Italia. Filippo II, Genova, Milano e la strategia asburgica nel fatidico 1575", in E. García Hernán, D. Maffi (eds.), *Estudios sobre guerra y sociedad en la Monarquía Hispánica. Guerra marítima, estrategia, organización y cultura militar (1500-1700)*, Valencia, pp. 853-878.
- PARIGINO G.V. (2014), "Continuità e mutamento. Il feudo nel Granducato mediceo tra espansione territoriale e promozione sociale", in *Ricerche Storiche*, 44, pp. 209-232.
- PICCINNO L. (2013), *I trasporti in Liguria all'inizio dell'Ottocento. Nuove dimensioni e modelli operative*, Milan.
- PIRILLO P. (2005), "Signorie dell'Appennino tra Toscana ed Emilia-Romagna alla fine del Medioevo", in F. Cengarle, G. Chittolini and G.M. Varanini (eds.), *Poteri signorili e feudali nelle campagne dell'Italia settentrionale fra Tre e Quattrocento: fondamenti di legittimità e forme di esercizio*, Florence, pp. 211-225.
- POSTAN M.M., HATCHER J. (1978), "Population and Class Relations in Feudal Society", in *Past & Present*, 78, pp. 24-37.
- RADEFFE A. (1991), "Grandes et petites foires du Moyen Age au 20e siècle. Conjoncture générale et cas Vaudois", in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, 75, pp. 329-348.
- RAGGIO O. (2018), *Feuds and State Formation, 1550-1700. The Backcountry of the Republic of Genoa*, Cham.
- RAVIOLA B.A. (2012), "The imperial system in early modern northern

- Italy: a web of dukedoms, fiefs and enclaves along the Po”, in J. W. Evans and Peter H. Wilson (eds.), *The holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806: A European perspective*, Leiden, pp. 217-236.
- (2013), “Piedmont as a composite state (ecclesiastic enclaves, fiefs, boundaries)”, in M. Vester (ed.), *Sabaudian studies: political culture, dynasty and territory, 1400-1700*, Kirksville, pp. 278-297.
  - (2017), “The small States in Early Modern Italy: Definitions, Examples and Interactions”, in D. Bornstein, L. Gaffuri and B.J. Maxson (eds.), *Languages Of Power In Italy (1300-1600)*, Turnhout, pp. 3-16.
- RIZZO M. (2008), “Gli Austrias e l’Italia centrosettentrionale nella prima età moderna. Una rapsodia geopolitica, in Feudi di Lunigiana tra Impero, Spagna e Stati Italiani (XV-XVIII secolo)”, in *Memorie della Accademia Lunigianese di Scienze “Giovanni Capellini”*, 78, pp. 67-113.
- RONSIJN W. (2014), “Smallholders, Spinners, Weavers and the ‘Scarcity of Markets’ in the Flemish Countryside, c. 1780-1850: Motivations behind the Multiplication of Periodic Markets”, in *Rural History*, 25, pp. 39-60.
- SCHNETTGER M., VERGA M. (2006), *L’Impero e l’Italia nella prima età moderna*, Bologna.
- SEARLE C.E. (1986), “Custom, Class Conflict and Agrarian Capitalism: The Cumbrian Customary Economy in the Eighteenth Century”, in *Past & Present*, 110, pp. 106-133.
- SISTO A. (1956), *I feudi imperiali nel Tortonese (sec. XI-XIX)*, Turin.
- TIGRINO V. (2007), “Giurisdizione e transiti nel Settecento. I Feudi imperiali tra il Genovesato e la Pianura Padana”, in M. Cavallera (ed.), *Lungo le antiche strade. Vie d’acqua e di terra tra stati, giurisdizioni e confini nella cartografia dell’età moderna*, Busto Arsizio, pp. 45-94.
- (2007), “Giurisdizione e transiti nei ‘feudi di Montagna’ dei Doria Pamphilj alla fine dell’Antico Regime”, in A. Torre (ed.), *Per vie di terra. Movimenti di uomini e di cose nelle società di antico regime*, Milan, pp. 151-174.
- TORRE A. (2020), *Production of Locality in the Early Modern and Modern Age. Places*, London.

- VAN BAVEL B.J.P., HOYLE R. (eds.) (2010), *Social relations, property and power*, Turnhout.
- Vaquero Piñero M. (2017), "Terre e acque nella signoria dei Caetani di Sermoneta (1504-1586)," in C. Fiorani (ed.), *Virtù più che virili. Le lettere familiari di Beatrice Caetani Cesi (1557-1608)*, Rome, pp. 7-31.
- VON ARETIN K.O. (1978), "L'ordinamento feudale in Italia nel XVI e XVII secolo e le sue ripercussioni sulla politica europea. Un contributo alla storia del tardo feudalesimo in Europa", in *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, pp. 51-94.
- WILLIAMSON O. (1981), "The Economics of Organizations: The Transaction Cost Approach", in *American Journal of Sociology*, 87/3, pp. 548-577.
- ZANINI A. (2005), *Strategie politiche ed economia feudale ai confini della Repubblica di Genova (secoli XVI-XVIII)*. "Un buon negotio con qualche contrarietà", Genova.
- (2011), "Feudi, feudatari ed economie nella montagna ligure", in M. Schnettger and C. Taviani (eds.), *Libertà e dominio. Il sistema politico genovese: le relazioni esterne e il controllo del territorio*, Roma, pp. 305-316.
  - (2017), *Impresa e finanza a Genova. I Crosa (secoli XVII-XVIII)*, Genova.