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## REVIEW ARTICLES

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### *The Wool Guild in Medieval Florence*\*

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The medieval Florentine cloth industry was studied at the beginning of this century by A. Doren in a work which has become a classic in the economic history of the Middle Ages and various aspects of the industry were subsequently the subjects of detailed and thorough studies. Hidetoshi Hoshino was not embarking on virgin soil when he undertook research in this area of medieval economic history. Following his earlier important essays<sup>1</sup> which summarized some of his findings, the present book offers an overall study of the historic development of Florence's woollen industry in the period. It is based on thorough and patient research in the archives of Florence and many other towns of Italy as well as in those of neighbouring countries. Hoshino has systematically studied the account books and the ledgers of the Florentine cloth producers and merchants, judicial acts and custom tariffs, merchant manuals and various other sources. The conclusions the author draws from the documents and literary sources are cautious and carefully balanced, and his knowledge of the literature that deals with the subject of his research can only arouse praise. His monograph is a very valuable contribution to the economic history of Southern Europe in the later Middle Ages.

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\* H. HOSHINO, *L'arte della lana in Firenze nel basso medioevo, il commercio della lana e il mercato dei panni fiorentini nei secoli XIII-XV*, Florence, L.S. OLSCHKI, 1980 (Biblioteca Storica Toscana, a cura della Deputazione Toscana di Storia Patria, 21), pp. 356.

<sup>1</sup> "Per la storia dell'arte della lana in Firenze nel Trecento e nel Quattrocento, un riesame," *Annuario* (of the Istituto giapponese di cultura in Roma), X (1972/9), p. 67 ff.; *L'industria laniera fiorentina dal basso medioevo all'età moderna* (Roma, 1978).

The author concludes from his sources that in the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century there was almost no difference between the products of the Florentine cloth industry and those of the manufactures of the towns of Northern Italy (p. 41, 98). The most costly woollen fabrics of Florence in that period fetched no higher prices than the cheapest kinds of cloth produced in Flanders (p. 76). Hoshino's statement concerning the marketing of Florentine cloth in the Levant at that time is very interesting. He says that he found no documents referring to Florentines who themselves sold the woollen products of their town in the Levant (p. 81). This conclusion is in keeping with that made by W. Heyd a hundred years ago, namely that at that time the Florentines engaged in banking in the Near East.<sup>2</sup> The account by the Florentine Lionardo Frescobaldi of his travels in Egypt and in Syria in 1384/5 seems to confirm this conclusion, for he mentions that the agents of the Portinari in Alexandria and in Damascus were bankers.<sup>3</sup> But surely one cannot claim that the Florentines acted exclusively as bankers in the Levant in this period. However, Hoshino rightly emphasizes that in the fourteenth century, Southern Italy was the most important market for Florentine cloth (p. 82). The Levantine markets where Florentine cloth was sold by other merchants were secondary outlets for the town's textile production.

The third decade of the fourteenth century was a turning point in the history of the cloth industry of Florence: the Florentines began to produce high quality cloth imitating the fine French and Flemish woollen stuffs, and then in the 1330's, they began to use the best kinds of English wool (p. 130, 141). By the second half of the fourteenth century, Florentine cloth of the costly kind, the so-called S. Martino cloth, had conquered the markets of the ancient world; it was sold in Spain, in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Levant. In the latter region the Venetians acted as the salesmen (p. 186, 189, 190). Hoshino's conclusions concerning the volume of Florence's cloth production in that period are one of the major results of his research, and from an analysis of various accounts he concludes that in the second half of the fourteenth century Florence produced no more than 20-30,000 pieces a year (p. 198 ff.) and in the 1420's - 10-12,000 pieces (p. 204 ff.).

In the fifteenth century, Hoshino claims that the Florentine cloth industry underwent some significant changes: in the first half the production of the fine S. Martino cloth decreased (p. 231) and, on the other hand, the Spanish (Catalan) wool used for *garbo* fabrics was beginning to be replaced by wool of the Abruzzi (p. 278 ff.). The end of the fifteenth century saw a new period of growth in the history of the Florentine cloth industry and once again 20-30,000 pieces a year were produced (p. 238, 240). The new upswing was mainly the effect of the opening up of that great market provided by the new Ottoman

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<sup>2</sup> *Histoire du commerce du Levant* (Leipzig, 1885/6), II, p. 478.

<sup>3</sup> *Viaggi in Terrasanta*, ed. C. Angelini (Florence, 1944), p. 48.

empire and the friendship between the Florentines and the Ottoman Turks made it possible to market great quantities of their woollen fabrics, mainly those of the garbo kind, there.

After referring to the major results of Hoshino's research, we must emphasize once again the great value of this book for all those who are interested in medieval history, and especially in the economic history of late medieval Europe. The systematic elaboration of the data concerning cloth prices is worthy of great praise; and the evaluation of the different accounts that have a bearing on the volume of cloth production is a fine piece of research. The numerous tables Hoshino has compiled make it possible for the reader to draw some conclusions himself and to check those made by the author.

Yet at times there is a certain lack of precision. The term "cloth of Rascia" is not explained at all (p. 237), but this was of course Serbian cloth, Rascia being the ancient name of Serbia. What the author says about the relatively limited diffusion of Florentine cloth in late medieval Sicily (p. 192 f., 295) is also untenable, since any notarial acts that have come down to us in the archives of Sicily from the fifteenth century testify to the continuous and voluminous import of Florentine cloth into the island, it seems that this was mainly the fine S. Martino cloth.<sup>4</sup> The explanation the author offers for the decline of the export of Florentine cloth to Venice (or via Venice to the Levant) (p. 246) is not satisfactory, insofar as a very important reason for this phenomenon has been overlooked — the great expansion of the woollen industry of Brescia, where considerable quantities of cheap cloth were produced. In the second half of the fifteenth century, Brescia cloth had an excellent market in the Levantine countries and especially in Syria, and the Venetians were very much engaged in this export trade.<sup>5</sup>

More important for an evaluation of Hoshino's book is the impression one has reading it attentively that the author has not drawn certain conclusions from his sources that would almost seem to impose themselves upon the historian. It would be unfair to say that the author did not see the important connexions between the various phases in the development of Florence's woollen industry and other phenomena of European economic history, but at times he mentions facts of very great significance without pointing to the connections at all. He emphasizes that the specialisation of the Florentine clothmakers in the production

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<sup>4</sup> ASPal (Archivio di Stato, Palermo), notaio Aprea, Antonino, 809, f. 222a; ASCet (Archivio di Stato, Catania) (fondo notarile di Randazzo), Manfredi di Mariotta, 2, f. 40b; ASTrap (Archivio di Stato, Trapani), notai Alemanno Zuccala, 8527, f. 532a (... Jan. 1414); Francesco Milo, 8627, f. 347b (a. 1447); Giovanni Forziano, 8741, f. 159a (a. 1451).

<sup>5</sup> See my paper "L'exportation de textiles occidentaux dans le Proche-Orient musulman au bas Moyen Age (1370-1517)," (in) *Studi in memoria di Federigo Melis* (Naples, 1978), II, p. 321 ff.

of high quality cloth occurred in the period immediately subsequent to the Black Death (p. 178), without dwelling on the fact. Is it far fetched to maintain that this phenomenon contradicts the theory of a general economic depression in Europe in that period? Even the Venetian cloth industry flourished in the last quarter of the fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

As we have already emphasized, Hoshino's elaboration of the data concerning the prices of Florentine cloth is one of the great merits of his book. His conclusions from those data referring to their prices on some Levantine markets (p. 188 f.) are, however, mistaken. Contrary to Hoshino's interpretation, most price on the Syrian markets in the late fourteenth century and in the first half of the fifteenth century are those of a piece (pezza)<sup>7</sup> and are given in Venetian ducats. The agents of Francesco Datini, who at the end of the fourteenth century compiled price lists in Damascus and Alexandria quoted them in *dirhams*, and so did the agents of the Venetian firm Antonio Zane until the middle of 1411. They then began to quote the prices of all commodities, both Oriental and European, in ducats. Even the price lists Giovanni da Uzzano has included in his manual comprise the prices of "pieces" of Florentine (and of other) cloth in Damascus and in ducats (explicitly).<sup>8</sup> All these data show convincingly the slow but progressive decline of the prices of Florentine cloth on the Levantine markets.<sup>9</sup> One becomes aware of the same trend when studying the prices of other European cloth, which was marketed in that period in the Levant (e. g. the so-called *gilforte*, *loesti* and *bastardi*).<sup>10</sup> One can draw two conclusions

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<sup>6</sup> N. FANO, "Ricerche sull'arte della lana a Venezia nel XIII e XIV secolo," *Archivio Veneto*, serie V, vol. 18 (1936), p. 142.

<sup>7</sup> See F. MELIS, *Aspetti della vita economica medievale* (Siena 1962), p. 384; ASPrat (Archivio di Stato, Prato), fondo Datini 1171, price list of Damascus of 30 May 1395; price lists of Antonio Zane in ASV (Archivio di Stato, Venezia), Proc. di S. Marco, Comm. miste, Ba 128a, fasc. V: price lists of 26 March 1411, 8 Oct. 1411, 22 March 1413 ("pezza Fiorenza").

<sup>8</sup> PAGNINI, *Della decima IV*, p. 114 (this list does not refer to Alexandria and to the year 1442, as Hoshino believes, see p. 189, but to prices in Damascus, sometime in the early 1420's); archives of Ant. Zane (see above), letters of Lorenzo Foscarini from Damascus of 23 March, 16 Aug. and 14 Sept. 1413, 24 March 1414 (Hoshino's interpretation of these documents is wrong for another reason: he believes that 20 dirham-equalled a ducat, but this was their exchange rate at the end of the fourteenth century, whereas in the fifteenth century the dirham was worth first 1/30-1/45 ducat and in the second half 1/50 ducat, see my paper "Etudes sur le système monétaire des Mamlouks circassiens," *Isr. Or. Studies V*, 1976, p. 277 ff.).

<sup>9</sup> See also the prices quoted in judicial acts referring to transactions in (about) 1410 in Alexandria and in 1413 in Damascus, and quoted in my paper "L'exportation de textiles etc.," p. 314.

<sup>10</sup> *Art. cit.*, p. 316, 345, 347.

from these documents: the European merchants operating in the Levant had to adapt themselves to the general depression prevailing in the Near East, and when the prices of all commodities went down, they had to sell the cloth they imported at lower prices; secondly, the lowering of cloth prices would only have been possible, if production costs been decreasing. Many of the data adduced by Hoshino in dealing with the prices of Florentine cloth in other regions point to the same trend. Was it only the replacement of Spanish wool by Italian that made this possible? The fact that prices of Florentine cloth went down from the beginning of the fifteenth century and that at the same time those of other (English) cloths followed the same trend points to the impact of other factors, probably technological progress. Unfortunately, Hoshino does not dwell at all on this aspect of Florentine cloth production.

