

Project: *Pratiche della Mercatura*, Cross-Cultural Exchange, and Trans-Mediterranean Trade in the Late Middle Ages, c. 1275-1450

Scholarship has long recognized Italian preponderance in Mediterranean commerce during the late Middle Ages. In recent years, studies have greatly enriched our understanding of how cross-cultural communication helped foster Italian mercantile relations in foreign, non-European markets. Yet surprisingly, a corpus of material that constitutes a valuable documentary record of the Italian merchant's education and understanding of Islamic or Saracen culture remains untouched: *pratiche della mercatura*, or manuals of commercial practice. These handbooks, widely circulated throughout central and northern Italy, contained vital information pertaining to the merchant's understanding and awareness of Islamic cultures and customs outside the realm of commercial affairs. Taking these manuals as its documentary focus, this project's chief aim was to explore Italian mercantile conceptions of the non-western Mediterranean world. However, my project began to evolve after many fruitful exchanges with the Mediterranean Institute's interdisciplinary community, and, in particular, with my literary colleagues. As a result, my research also sought to broaden the ways in which we classify the *pratica* genre.

The "traditional" *pratica della mercatura*, composed by merchants for merchants, included material that a merchant deemed most important in his commercial affairs. Francesco Pagnini first classified the genre of "*pratiche*" based on their data germane to wares and tares, a classification adopted by subsequent scholarship, most prominently Robert Lopez. For the most part, this scholarship has remained interested in extracting financial information from these manuals in order to better understand the complexities of the Mediterranean economy or the acumen of the Italian tradesman. Yet, within these layers of economic data there still remains a body of overlooked material that reveals the Italian merchant's education and understanding of Saracen culture. The Mediterranean Institute provided me with the time to systematically examine all traditional manuals (eight in total) and catalogue the appropriate cross-cultural material.

The most well-known, and best preserved, "traditional" manual is Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's *The Book of Descriptions of Countries* (c. 1310-40). Fortunately, the secondary literature I consulted at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra Library in Barcelona enabled me to appreciate the scope of Pegolotti's merchant audience: *The Book of Descriptions* was widely circulated throughout central and northern Italy for several centuries after its composition. Pegolotti's text is full of financial commentary that prepared the aspiring merchant for the

commercial markets of the Mediterranean basin. Yet, interspersed in these chapters, the reader is furnished with cultural guides to these markets as well. For example, the Italian merchant was provided with extensive philological guides in foreign languages including Persian, Armenian, Arabic, Mongolian, and Cumanic. Obviously, these guides translate a whole host of commercial terms – from banker to market to woolen cloth – but also translate basic, conversational phrases. Curiously, in the foreign land of Cathay, or China, Pegolotti advises the reader to grow a beard when conducting trade in woolen products so as not to appear too foreign to Tartar sellers. Thereafter, Pegolotti encourages the merchant to hire multiple dragomen who are knowledgeable in both Cumanic culture and language, and are preferably native. This counsel certainly chimes emphatically with the work of the Institute’s invited lecturer, Dr. Roser Sally-Kru, who has convincingly shown that diplomatic and mercantile guides were resourceful intermediaries of acculturation in the medieval Mediterranean. Pegolotti further advises the merchant on foreign culture in his brief commentary on eastern politics. Here, we read that there are frequent transfers of lordly power between Azov and China which typically signal bouts of disorder and the “Frank,” or European, should be cautious when conducting trade with Tartars. Thus, through a reexamination of the “traditional” manual, I discovered fascinating information on foreign markets far beyond their financial data.

One of the many advantages of the Barcelona Institute was that its participants represented a broad spectrum of academic disciplines. As a trained historian who deals primarily with merchants texts, I found conversations with the seminar’s literary specialists most beneficial: especially with the Institute’s co-director, Dr. Sharon Kinoshita; as well as our guest lecturer, Dr. Daniel Selden. Through fruitful exchanges with my colleagues I became very interested, and wary, in how the aforesaid historiography had traditionally defined the manual genre. These suspicions were further kindled upon consulting the works of Dr. Vittore Branca, a literary scholar who, one generation ago, proposed that we loosen our rigid classification of *pratiche* and celebrate its potential diversity. Equipped with this new insight, and, in conjunction with a recently transcribed fifteenth-century Florentine manuscript, I endeavored to follow Dr. Branca’s call.

Prior to my arrival in Barcelona, I had transcribed a compendium of manuscripts found in the Florentine archival library, the Biblioteca Riccardiana, entitled *MS 818*. This codex features many components that were crucial to an aspiring merchant’s education in the late medieval period. Included in this compendium are copies of two texts of particular interest:

Leonardo Frescobaldi's *Visit to Egypt and the Holy Land* (c. 1384-85) and Goro Dati's pedagogical poem, *The Sphere* (c. 1435). Although neither text provides financial commentaries that are found in the traditional merchant manual, they nevertheless were composed by merchants (Frescobaldi was a banker; Dati, a silk merchant), discuss foreign commercial cultures, and were available to a wide merchant audience. Indeed, Dati's *Sphere* was one of the most copied texts of fifteenth-century Florence. Thus, my ongoing research, crucially conceived in Barcelona, asserts that we broaden the manual genre and define it based on author, audience, and commercial content.

The cross-cultural information found in these two texts is truly remarkable. The first text, *Visit to the Holy Places*, includes a vast amount of detailed information concerning Levantine geography and history, Christian theology, commercial counsel, as well as a palpable interest in things Islamic. Frescobaldi composed chapters entitled "Customs of the Saracens," "A Moslem Wedding," and "A Moslem Feast:" all of which indicate a genuine interest in the way Muslims functioned. His commercial counsel seems to reflect this interest. Upon describing the commercial goods of Cairo, "sugar, spices, and every victual," he records that, "And know you that the Saracens pay reverence to the Virgin Mary and to St John the Baptist...and they hold Christ to be, after Mohammed, the greatest prophet, and that he was not born of the corruption of the flesh, but that the breath of God the Father by the mouth of the Angel gave flesh to the Divine Word; and in many things they draw near to our faith." Likewise, in *The Sphere*'s fourth book, Dati provides a "hybrid portolan" for the reader where he focuses exclusively on the African and Asian continents. In this section Dati gives ample attention to the Saracens in these regions. Indeed, he dedicates an entire stanza to the city of Mecca and the importance it holds for the Muslim faith.

In conclusion, I must emphasize that this project is a work in progress and is still in need of further research (to be conducted concurrent with, and subsequent to, my doctoral dissertation). Nevertheless, the evidence strongly suggests that a rereading of the traditional merchant manual, in conjunction with a broadening of the genre based on audience, author, and content can illuminate a multiplicity of things related to the medieval Italian merchant's understanding of foreign cultures in the Mediterranean and how acculturation may have been instrumental in negotiating trade around the Mediterranean basin in the late medieval period.